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# **RELINQUISHING KNOWING AND RECLAIMING BEING**

**A HEURISTIC SELF-SEARCH INQUIRY OF BECOMING A COUNSELLOR THROUGH  
LEARNING TO TOLERATE UNCERTAINTY BY REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCES IN  
LIFE, COUNSELLING PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**



**BY**

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PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE IN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING**

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Krista Tweedie

**ABSTRACT**

Previous research emphasises the importance of a counsellor's 'way of being' in determining therapeutic effectiveness and outcome. The capacity to tolerate uncertainty is regarded as an important counsellor attribute. However, failing to show *how* counsellors learn this, limits the practical relevance of the existing literature for psychotherapy and counselling. This study questions how a counsellor can learn to bring his or her self more fully into relationship with clients and what the implications of this learning process on counselling work are. Central to this study is Levine's (2002) conception that learning occurs through a willingness to think about experiences, which necessitates facing uncertainty.

This thesis argues that the capacity to tolerate uncertainty is an individual learning process and a precondition for a counsellor developing his or her 'way of being' or therapeutic 'use of self' (Wosket, 1999). In this study, the counselling practitioner-researcher draws on her own learning process to show how reflection on personal issues triggered by experiences of uncertainty, that could obstruct a counsellor's emotional availability necessary for 'use of self', may be a fundamental part of counsellor professional development. A learning process is demonstrated through reflection on five vignettes of experiences of uncertainty from life and counselling practice. Beginning with an inexplicable experience in counselling practice that the counsellor struggles to understand her response to, she

wonders how her difficulty with tolerating uncertainty might relate to experiences of uncertainty and learned defences from her childhood and adolescence.

Through an experience with a client's overt uncertainty, the practitioner grasps the difference between *trying* to tolerate uncertainty and developing this capacity as a 'way of being'. When creative and play work with a child client challenges use of the counsellor's defences, her learning moves from a conceptual understanding to an embodied one. She becomes more present and vulnerable with clients allowing for connection with clients and greater depth in counselling work. The practitioner-researcher attributes this personal learning to the six phases of Sela Smith's (2002) heuristic self-search inquiry that requires immersing in uncertainty, dwelling in the research question and accessing tacit knowledge. This study contributes to a lack of practical literature within psychotherapy and counselling on how counsellors develop their therapeutic 'use of self', a way of being that has been linked to effective therapeutic outcome yet only a small number of therapists possess. Although the process and findings of this subjective study cannot be generalised, it aims to stimulate each counsellors' own reflection on therapeutic 'use of self'. This study suggests a heuristic self-search framework for a counsellor to confront his or her own relationship to uncertainty as an integral part of professional development beyond what training can provide.

**KEY TERMS:** uncertainty; therapeutic use of self; vulnerability; play; creativity; connection; heuristic self-search inquiry

**DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work, carried out principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged; to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent had been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning”.

Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Signature of candidate: \_\_\_\_\_

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout writing, I had a strong sense of myself as a little girl, bright orange hair, sun-kissed skin and determined freckles. I could recount the freedom I felt, running and playing and the stubbed big toe that bled under where the skin had been partly torn away. A fleeting flood of tears could only keep me momentarily. I could also hear an echo of a past client in his battle with the therapy process, voicing that he could no longer tolerate visiting feelings he associated with his past. Even though he described his 'little boy' inside of him as having a lot to say that he never had the chance to, to pay too much attention to him now made the client feel that he is still as vulnerable as a boy. However, in his counselling process, he eventually comes to powerfully state that he can still be a grown man who holds this little boy's hand. I kept these two images with me throughout my research process – a process that embraces the vulnerability, spontaneity, resilience and playfulness of myself as a little girl. I wrote whilst holding her hand. I appreciate those who nurtured me on this learning path, despite its stops and starts and giant potholes. You know who you are.

Thank you to my clients who challenge me in unfathomable ways and have incited this learning process. Thank you to my friends, family, supervisors and therapist for the support, learning opportunities and conversations but most of all for the laughter that came at times I needed it most. I would have never been able to tolerate the uncertainty of this journey without you.

## LAY SUMMARY

Previous studies find that the personal characteristics of the counsellor may determine therapeutic effectiveness and outcome. These studies do not address how a counsellor can learn to be effective. Learning to tolerate uncertainty is discussed as important for developing as a counsellor who can use his or her unique helpful personal characteristics in the counselling relationship. This study shows one counsellor's learning progression of developing the capacity to overcome avoidance of uncertainty as a way of discovering her helpful characteristics. This learning is demonstrated through a process of reflecting on experiences of uncertainty in life and counselling practice. Her way of being with clients begins to change and the therapeutic effect of being receptive to uncertainty is discovered. Experiences of uncertainty in counselling work become an opportunity for connection with clients and deeper therapeutic work.

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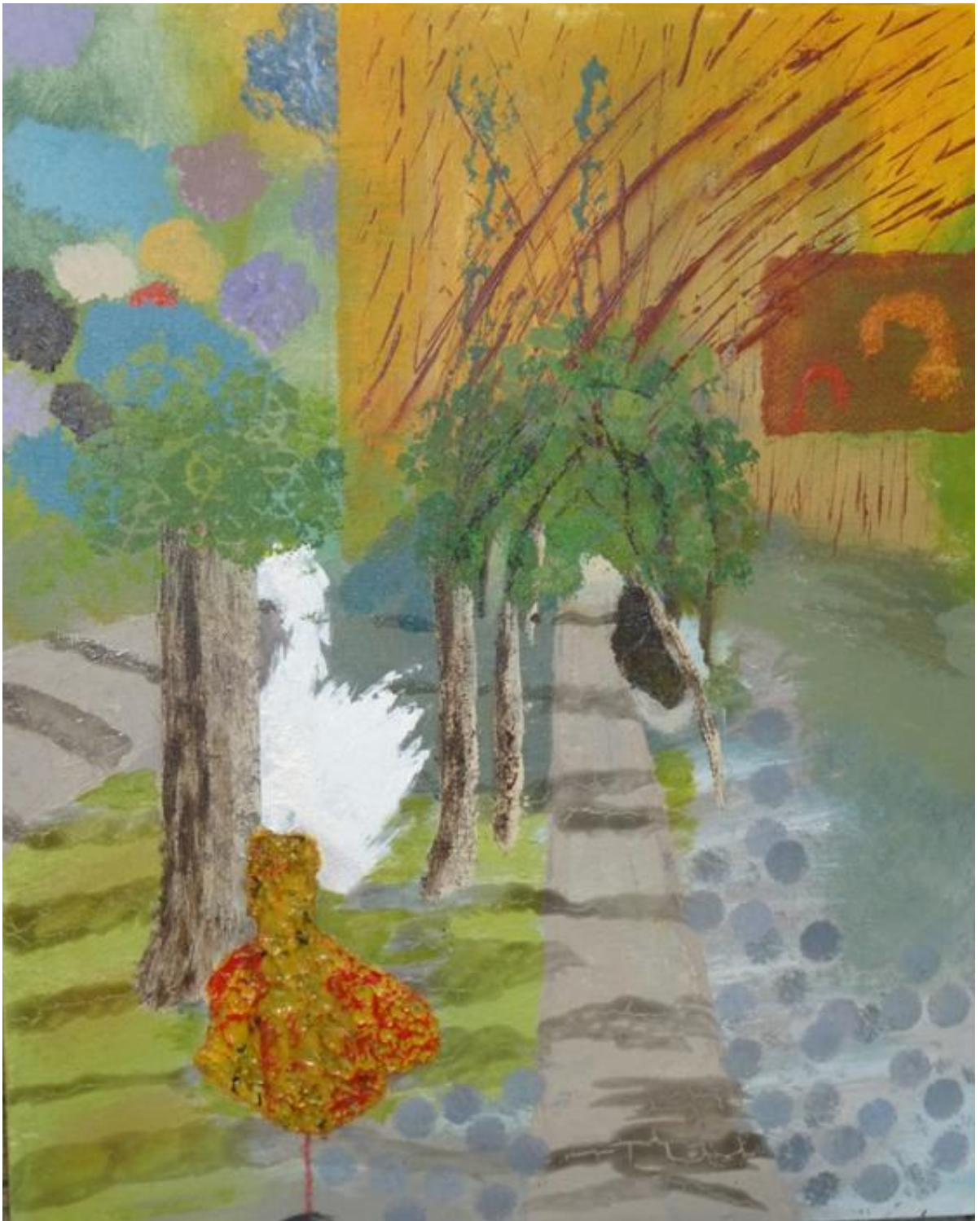
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*“All therapists bring imperfect selves to the practice of therapy” – Val Wosket*



A: "An Unknown Path"

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

People like to know what to expect, to be prepared, so they look for certainty to support them in an uncertain world. Regardless of theoretical orientation or level of experience, practitioners of psychotherapy and counselling are required to work in uncertainty. Therefore, learning to be a practitioner involves developing the capacity to tolerate uncertainty. This learning may require reflecting on one's own responses in experiences of uncertainty outside as well as inside the consulting room: in life, counselling training and therapeutic practice.

At the same time as trainees are coping with a range of transitions internally, in the course, in their functioning as counsellors and as adult learners, ordinary human life flows on around and through them (Johns, 1996, p. 82).

I feel most dis-eased when I do not know how things will come together, or if they ever will. Alongside counselling training, I am anticipating turning thirty and I am feeling time pressure to meet life's milestones that 'should' soon follow - Next = career, partner, marriage, babies right? At times I feel I could drown in the anxiety of not being able to know, to control, to predict. It feels safer to think further ahead, to focus on the final product, the outcome, what lies in store, keeping my mind blocked from realising I cannot possibly know for certain how I will get from now to there. What will emerge in that space? And will 'there' even be there when I get there? The 'planner me', the over-thinker who is predicting and forward-focused, avoiding surprises and always one step ahead of herself can trump how I feel or what I am experiencing in the present moment – the destination reigns, rather than taking in the scenery along the winding path. I struggle to stop and smell the roses when I have no idea if the path continues in circles, branches off somewhere new or comes to a halt.

Seemingly in a heartbeat, I sold my life piece by piece and its distorted shadows of what it once was were packed into two cases. Moving 4,442 miles or a thirteen-hour flight away from everything and everyone I know, I came to Scotland from Canada's West Coast to pursue the study of psychotherapy and counselling. An unknown path seemed to all of a sudden starkly lie before me, dredging up a

myriad of uncertainties that would only be heightened by my counselling training. I plunged into darkness, removing myself from familiarity and taking up the study of counselling in another country to force myself it seems, to begin to work on my personal issues with uncertainty from inside the jaws of the unknown. I recall rattling off on numerous occasions to my therapist a list of all the things I do not know or feel uncertain about, tears streaming down my face at how overwhelming it all is:

*“I just need ONE thing! Just one of these things to feel guaranteed and then I can tolerate the rest. Or I just need a glimpse, I need to be sure that where I get to will be a place of peace, happiness, fulfilment, calm and gratitude – okay? If I could know this, be promised this (can you promise me this?), then let everything else be uncertain, let the universe do its worst! Please tell me what I should do!”*

I was this client. I have these clients. I became the counsellor.

Might I be taking my current relationship with uncertainty into my counselling practice? What effect could this have?

Whilst adjusting to the unknowns of life in a new country, the unknowns of counselling training and practice surrounded me. Riddled with frustration in the beginning of my interpersonal counselling training in the dialogue between person-centred and psychodynamic orientations, and coming from a conventional education system, I initially yearned to be given constructive teachings on how to do this thing called counselling. Yet along with the copious amounts of theory, I am introduced to ‘trusting in the process’ (Rogers, 1958) or finding my own way to becoming a counsellor. This is a premise that grates against how I was previously familiar with developing learning and knowing through instruction. My frustration mixes with confusion and challenge. I sense that I ‘know’ how to trust the process; it is just not a kind of knowing that I can access. I find myself standing in one corner opposite uncertainty that bounces in the other corner, gloves raised, fervently awaiting an impending struggle, floored by internal riddles such as, ‘What is the difference between learning to ‘do’ counselling and ‘being’ a counsellor?’ Beginning to answer this question for myself aids my journey toward finding my own way to becoming a counsellor.

Rogers most famously writes of 'being' in the counselling room as being one's authentic, congruent self (Rogers, 1980). This means continually integrating all aspects of my self and presenting my self to the world (including clients) in a way that matches my thoughts and feelings at an inner level (Bohart, 2007). Similarly, English paediatrician and object relations psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott (1896-1891), also placed importance on the ability to just 'be' rather than to 'do' (Rosenberg, 2005; Winnicott, 1971). The capacity to 'be', according to Winnicott (1971) is needed to be one's '*true self*'. Being is only possible if I am not caught up in a '*false self*' obstructed by a compulsive cycle of 'doing' (calculating and thinking) and trying to conceal the absence of 'being' (original unconsciousness). I read Natiello's (2001), '*A Passionate Presence*' early in my counselling training when attempting to grasp person-centred concepts. She tells her story of beginning to understand the phrase, "It's the being, not the doing". Like Natiello (2001), I can articulate the person-centred 'way of being' quite eloquently yet I am still trying to figure out what I should do! What I explore in this study, is it is a counsellor's 'being' that is most important to therapeutic practice rather than what he or she knows or does. Developing this 'being' as a counsellor requires not feeling the need to 'do'. I believe a counsellor's capacity to 'be' rather than 'do' depends on his or her relationship to uncertainty.

Previous studies (Lambert & Barley, 2001) have found that the effectiveness and therefore therapeutic outcome of counselling is not attributed to theoretical orientation or associated therapeutic techniques but to the counsellor's personal characteristics or 'way of being'. I argue that learning to tolerate uncertainty is a precondition to a counsellor using his or her self most effectively in the counselling relationship. Theoretical orientation does not provide certainty of how to be in the uncertainty of the counselling process. This is something that cannot be taught: a realisation riddled with exposure to the harsh elements of uncertainty. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to learning to tolerate uncertainty. This learning requires an individual process that each counsellor needs to discover for his or her self. Therefore, in this study, I use my self as an example. I show my own process of becoming a counsellor who can tolerate uncertainty, what this entails, and the discovered effect this has on the mutuality of relationship and depth of my therapeutic work. My learning begins with not defining



myself as either a person-centred or psychodynamic practitioner to maintain a degree of uncertainty that allows me to find where I fit in the dialogue between these two approaches to therapeutic practice that stems from my own experiences, feeling and developing self-awareness.

At the start of counselling practice, I am met with a flurry of self-questioning when first beginning to find myself in the room with clients; all of a sudden, I am a counsellor with no clue how to wear this suit. I am overtly aware of my physical presence. Rigid and awkward, my legs are crossed with my left arm in a perfect ninety-degree angle, pointer finger gingerly resting just under my chin to convey the perfect amount of inquisitiveness and professionalism... nod, reflect, nod, reflect.... I guess I am possibly trying to meet what I have decided are my clients' expectations of me. I feel removed, disconnected and not able to just be myself. Who is this person? What am I trying to prove – to myself, to my clients? As far as I can tell, I am perceived as competent and trustworthy – the majority of my clients contract for long-term work that seems to withstand rupture and repair. Clients develop self-understanding and seem to create change in their lives. Yet if I am honest with myself, if I pay attention to the lodged discomfort in my stomach, it says something is standing in the way of me being myself in the counselling room. Perhaps this feeling holds insight into the difference between *doing* counselling and *being* a counsellor. I grasp what Rogers, Winnicott and Natiello are getting at but like Glover (2009) asks, how do I move past this stage of a cognitive understanding of ideas such as 'authenticity', and the 'True Self' to 'being' them, or having an intuitive or embodied understanding? How can I feel 'more like myself'? I sense that I am holding back in some way from fully being me.

When first introduced to tuning into what Gendlin (1978) refers to as the 'felt-sense', it was during a 'focusing' exercise on my counselling course; my colleagues and I were asked to connect with how we were feeling in relation to being in our group. Despite this exercise now being a few years ago, I can still locate the exact feeling I had that day. I feel my upper chest, along my collarbone, hollowing out into a concave, shadowy cavern and feeling quite self-conscious about it being seen. I am wearing skin-like rubber gloves that cling tightly to my hands but are too long for my fingertips. The feeling

seems to say something about my potential as a counsellor and thus my counselling work being obstructed in some way.

In this study, I come to realise I try and control the relational aspect of the therapeutic process to some degree, not *really* showing up so I can block out my awareness of uncertainty, of what I cannot account for that provokes anxiety. I see anxiety as vulnerability and vulnerability as weakness and weakness as lack of competence producing an unfit counsellor that *should* be sorted, grounded, blissfully happy, infinitely knowledgeable and robust! I am only beginning to learn the importance of bringing my vulnerable, uncertain '*feeling self*' into relationship with my clients. As I explore, this requires letting go of my defences that are triggered in uncertainty to counteract my vulnerability.

In counselling practice, uncertainty can elicit feelings of anxiety and insecurity for both the practitioner and the client. The counsellor may struggle to help clients to tolerate uncertainty if he or she cannot tolerate his or her own. A counsellor may respond in a way that blocks the ability to emotionally connect with clients in uncertainty, affecting potential therapeutic depth. In consideration of Brown (2012), Ehrenberg (1996) and Wosket's (1999) work, accessing emotional awareness and bringing one's vulnerable self into the counselling relationship may be key to reaching the greatest level of therapeutic work possible.

This study presents my personal and professional journey over a period of two years during which I am on practice placement at both an adult counselling centre and a children's therapeutic organisation (2011-2013). Five vignettes of experiences of uncertainty in life and counselling practice represent my progression of learning. It is through reflecting openly on these experiences that I develop awareness of what obstructs and facilitates my therapeutic 'use of self' (Wosket, 1999) as a counsellor. I come to attribute my learning to *be* a counsellor to a process of letting go of a need to *do* counselling. It is my developing the capacity to tolerate uncertainty that begins to open the door for me to bring my most vulnerable, human self into the counselling relationship. This learning comes to fruition through experiences of having to let go of reliance on cognitive knowledge or intellect as a sense of safety. This

seems to occur by learning to connect to my vulnerability through reclaiming my playful, creative and imaginative, authentic self. What I feel I have to offer to others gradually grows. Therefore, I demonstrate a working toward acceptance of my most valuable therapeutic tool, me. With discovering the key to developing my capacity to tolerate uncertainty, comes an inner awareness of how to in-turn, help clients to tolerate their own uncertainties. In my experience, this may not be possible without a willingness to be vulnerable and overcome my own ambivalence that may otherwise keep me from truly being in the experience of uncertainty alongside clients. In this exploration, I feel I am redefining my initial working understanding of the counselling relationship, moving from a conceptual understanding of relational, interpersonal counselling to an embodied one. This learning occurs through a willingness to reflect honestly on my experiences, facing my uncertainty. Eventually I am able to experience what ‘the unknown’ can offer the therapeutic relationship if uncertainty can be tolerated.

I aim to contribute to a lack of subjective, practice-based research as well as practical literature within psychotherapy and counselling on how counsellors develop their personal characteristics or ‘way of being’ that has been linked to positive therapeutic outcome (Lambert & Barley, 2001, 2002; McLeod, 2011; Skovholt & Jennings, 2004; Wosket, 1999). In this study, I show my learning progression of how I develop as a counsellor with an increasing ability to tolerate uncertainty and gain greater awareness of the implications of this learning on therapeutic practice. I offer an example of a qualitative research framework consistent with and relevant to the practice of counselling and psychotherapy, in particular, to the inevitability of working in uncertainty and the importance of a personal learning process and development of emotional awareness. I hope my story stimulates readers’ self-reflection on their own experiences of uncertainty in life and counselling practice that will aid their professional development and benefit clients.

## OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Following the introduction to this study, I provide a theoretical background and a literature review for the topic of uncertainty and ‘use of self’ in therapeutic practice in **Chapter II**. I draw awareness to the relationship between these two concepts and how they relate to therapeutic effectiveness and outcome. I discuss how I have come to situate my study amidst other studies on uncertainty and the unknown in therapeutic practice. I outline how learning occurs through reflecting on experiences and acknowledge a lack of studies written by practitioners of counselling that retain their own experience in the research. I acknowledge ‘use of self’ in research as a necessary approach for addressing how a counsellor learns to develop their unique therapeutic ‘use of self’ that may be obstructed by personal issues triggered by uncertainty. I introduce the current study’s aim to look at how a trainee counsellor learns to tolerate uncertainty and bring his or her self more fully into the counselling relationship and the implications of this on the therapeutic process. I express my intention to address this aim through comparing the aforementioned concepts to my own experiences, using my self as example. In my discussion of methodology in **Chapter III**, over three parts, I outline my methodological approach of heuristic self-search inquiry and each of its five phases. This includes the emergence of my research question, data and methods. I discuss ethical considerations and introduce five vignettes as well as how I have come to organise and present my study.

Chapters IV, V, and VI make up the substantive chapters of this study. In **Chapter IV**, I disclose an inexplicable experience involving client-work that has motivated this study. I reflect on my feelings that arise during and following this experience and wonder about my response as a counsellor to experiences of uncertainty. Investigating my response to this inexplicable experience leads to sharing a personal vignette. I reflect on experiences of uncertainty in my adolescence and my relationship with my mother that I feel has influenced what I value about myself and how this may affect how I respond in uncertain situations to counteract vulnerability. In **Chapter V**, I share a client-work vignette derived from counselling practice involving a client seeking answers to his experience. When reflecting on this interaction with a client, I begin to grasp that tolerating uncertainty needs to be learned beyond a

conceptual understanding. I then share a client-work vignette of an experience involving creativity, play and imagination in counselling practice work with a child. This experience challenges my safety in knowing and I begin to embody the capacity to tolerate uncertainty. My emotional awareness surrounding my relationship to uncertainty meets with my clients' present experience of feeling unable to control her situation of overwhelming uncertainty in **Chapter VI**. This vignette includes an experience of uncertainty in an ending with a client that I feel brings my learning to tolerate uncertainty and develop my 'use of self' to fruition. This is reflected in the sense of therapeutic depth that I feel my client is able to reach, perhaps because I become more emotionally available and vulnerable and am no longer obstructing the process.

In **Chapter VII**, I present learning, growth, discoveries and insights as final reflections on the study as a whole. I accept that knowledge is forever evolving and reaching a definitive conclusion would contradict my learning process of tolerating uncertainty. Instead, I summarise my writing as recognition that learning is never complete; every end is also a beginning. I discuss the strengths, challenges and limitations of my heuristic self-study and make suggestions for future research.

## **TERMINOLOGY**

### **Therapist, analyst, psychotherapist, counsellor, counselling practitioner, counselling psychologist:**

These terms are used interchangeably. I have written from my own training background in psychotherapy and counselling but I have included reference to work in the wider field of counselling psychology and analytic psychotherapy. Despite some differences in meaning of these terms, experiences of uncertainty and development of ‘use of self’ in therapeutic practice are equivalent across these practice backgrounds even though views on therapeutic ‘use of self’ may vary. Where I am not referring to my own work as a counsellor, I have either conserved the language used by authors whose work I reference or have chosen to use an inclusive, generic term of ‘practitioner’.

### **Client, patient, analysand:**

I consistently use the term ‘client’ in my writing as I feel it reflects the agency and mutuality of the person seeking counselling. However, I have left the terms ‘patient’ and ‘analysand’ where they have been used by other authors and researchers I have chosen to reference. I intend for these words to be regarded synonymously.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **UNCERTAINTY IN LEARNING TO BE A COUNSELLOR: BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to critically evaluate existing literature within the field of psychotherapy and counselling on what might determine a practitioner's therapeutic effectiveness and more importantly, how practitioners learn this. In this chapter, I discuss how successful therapeutic outcome may be attributed in part to a counsellor's capacity to tolerate uncertainty. I argue that Wosket's (1999) conception of therapeutic 'use of self' requires the capacity to tolerate uncertainty or have what Wilfred Bion called 'negative capability'. Current literature stresses the importance of both therapeutic 'use of self' and the capacity to tolerate uncertainty in counselling practice. However, there remains a significant unanswered question regarding *how* counsellors learn to develop their therapeutic 'use of self', especially if this requires coming to know how to not know. I question the practical relevance of the studies reviewed in this chapter and conclude that this question requires an individual exploration and response.

I break down the latter part of the title of my study, "*A heuristic self-search inquiry of becoming a counsellor through learning to tolerate uncertainty by reflecting on experiences in life, counselling practice and research*" into six key areas, five of which are discussed in this chapter. First, in 'Becoming a counsellor', I highlight the importance of the personal characteristics of the counsellor or his or her 'way of being' as it is represented in counselling and psychotherapy research. How counsellors bring their selves into the counselling relationship is discussed using Wosket's (1999) concept of therapeutic 'use of self'. This requires a practitioner's affective participation. However, anxiety associated with uncertainty might cause counsellors to rely on cognition as a way to avoid vulnerability and thus obstruct their 'use of self'. Next, I write to 'Tolerating uncertainty', or Bion's concept of 'negative capability' and his ideas of what blocks and facilitates this capacity. I do this

briefly to reflect my epistemological position as well as honour Bion's intention for his ideas to be engaged experientially as opposed to conceptually. I consider other, related concepts in a similar manner.

In '**Counselling practice and research**' I review three recent studies on topics of uncertainty and the unknown in therapeutic practice that highlight the importance of the counsellor's capacity to tolerate rather than avoid uncertainty and the ensuing effect on the therapeutic process. These studies suggest that learning to tolerate uncertainty is an individual process significant to professional development yet they focus on interviewees' experiences of the phenomenon of uncertainty as opposed to looking at how a counsellor might achieve this necessary learning. In '**Life and counselling practice**', I argue that the capacity to tolerate uncertainty hinges on the developing person or self-awareness of the counsellor. It cannot solely be grasped conceptually and cannot be reached through trying; it is attributed to a counsellor's way of life or being. I suggest this is a personal learning process of developing self-awareness of one's relationship to uncertainty by reflecting on experiences of uncertainty inside and outside the counselling room. In '**Reflecting on experiences**' I outline Levine's (2002) stance on how learning occurs from not only having experiences but through a willingness to reflect on experiences, which requires confronting one's uncertainty. The remaining key area reflected in the title of my study, '**A heuristic self-search inquiry**' is my chosen methodology discussed in the following chapter.

### **Becoming a counsellor**

Wosket (1999), author of *The Therapeutic Use of Self*, acknowledges how the dominant research paradigm has favoured the quantifiable study of comparable treatment interventions such as theoretical approach or technique. Therefore, these studies have attempted to eliminate variables of individual therapist characteristics in clinical trials, neglecting the self of the counsellor as possibly being a significant element in psychotherapy process and outcome. In 2001, a meta-analysis of empirical psychotherapy outcome research by Lambert and Barley supports Wosket's statement, concluding that, "in spite of research designs intended to minimize therapist effects on outcome, differences attributable to the therapists are frequently found" (p. 358).



After detailed analysis of more than one hundred studies that provide statistical analyses of the predictors of therapeutic outcome, Lambert and Barley (2001, 2002) conclude that extra-therapeutic factors (e.g. spontaneous remission, fortuitous events, social support) contribute 40% to client progress; common factors (variables found in most therapies e.g. the therapeutic alliance and therapist characteristics) contribute 30%; expectancy (placebo effects) contribute 15%; and therapy techniques (factors specific to the prescribed therapy) also contribute 15%. The factors most closely associated with the experience of therapy, the “common factors”, or client-therapist relationship factors, were strongly and consistently found to be the most significant contributing factors to positive psychotherapy outcome.

The therapist characteristics that were most frequently reported by clients as helpful in Lambert and Barley’s summary were likened to the core conditions that have been proposed by the founder of the person-centred approach to counselling, American psychologist, Carl R. Rogers (1902-1987). These are, *congruence* (or authenticity): that the therapist is genuine, non-defensive and real; *unconditional positive regard*: the therapist is accepting and non-judgemental; and *empathic understanding*: the therapist’s ability to understand the client’s private inner world ‘as if’ it were their own and communicate some of this understanding to the client (Rogers, 1967; Tootell, 2010; Lambert & Barley, 2001). Lambert and Barley (2001, p. 358) find that, “... it is difficult conceptually to differentiate between therapist variables (e.g. interpersonal style, therapist attributes), facilitative conditions (empathy, warmth, congruence), and the therapeutic alliance”. They acknowledge these concepts as overlapping and interdependent.

In reflection on his core conditions, Rogers later states that “perhaps it is something around the edges of those conditions that is really the most important element of therapy – when my self is very clearly, obviously present” (Baldwin, 2000, p. 30). As Schmid (2002) defines, “presence means to be authentically as a person; fully myself and fully open; whole; fully living the individual I am; fully living the relationships I am” (p. 63). Presence is described as one of the most important therapeutic gifts a therapist can offer a client. It is understood to be a precondition to the core conditions or the

foundation on which the core conditions can then be expressed (Greenberg & Geller, 2001) and therefore presumably a precondition to therapeutic effectiveness.

In this thesis, I am concerned with the “common factors” (Lambert & Barley, 2001), in particular, with therapeutic presence acting as a precondition to the core conditions and more specifically, congruence. With recognition that each core condition does not make therapeutic sense without the others and all three constitute one human attitude or fundamental ‘way of being’ (Schmid, 2002), this study explores what might enable (and disable) therapist congruence as it is described by Rogers (1967, p. 100): “being the feelings and attitudes which at the moment are flowing within him [sic]” and not hiding behind a professional role or holding back feelings that are obvious in the encounter. Not to be confused with ‘unbridled openness’, congruence comes from self-awareness of one’s own internal experience, self-acceptance, as well as a willingness to engage with a client and sensitively share one’s perceptions. Therapists need to be (fully) present and in contact with their clients as well as themselves to be congruent (Greenberg & Geller, 2001).

The congruent therapist “comes into a direct personal encounter with his [sic] client by meeting him on a person-to-person basis. It means that he is being himself, not denying himself” (Rogers, 1967, p. 101). Rogers was one of the first psychotherapy theorists to argue that the person of the therapist and his or her meeting the client in this way were key factors in facilitating therapeutic change. Meeting another person as fully present and fully human is represented in Buber’s (1970) I-Thou relationship and has alone been viewed as key to being an effective therapist and therefore healing for the client (Geller & Greenberg, 2002). How a counsellor creates the possibility for this meeting or encounter with a client (Buber, 1970; Ehrenberg, 1996; Schmid, 2002; Stern, 1998) is a key aspect in this study. I am interested in what facilitates a counsellor’s congruence and ability to meet a client. Equally, I wonder what might influence a counsellor to hide behind the role of counsellor and perhaps avoid congruent feelings. If presence is a precondition to the core conditions and the core conditions are a precondition to positive therapeutic outcome, what might be a precondition to presence?

**Therapeutic ‘use of self’**

Lambert and Barley (2001) conclude that emphasising relationship and other “common factors” in practice and research is likely to enhance client outcome far more than any one approach to psychotherapy or specific technique. As a result, in today’s research, there is more interest in discovering what is effective across all therapies (Lambert & Barley, 2002; McLeod, 2001, 2011; Wosket, 1999). After the clients’ perception of the therapist and therapeutic alliance, the next most reliable predictor of successful outcome, as repeatedly shown in psychotherapy research, is the quality of the therapeutic relationship (McLeod, 2011). Therefore, recent developments in the field have seen mounting attention starting to be paid to the role of the therapist in influencing change. This development supports research that recognises how the therapist is personally involved in the therapy process. This includes Wosket’s (1999) concept of a practitioner’s therapeutic ‘use of self’.

Wosket (1999) asserts the importance of the humanness or the vulnerability of the therapist. She writes that an effective therapeutic ‘use of self’ (like Rogers’ concept of congruence), entails immediacy or transparency of the therapist such as revelation of vulnerability. I understand Wosket’s ‘use of self’ to refer to how a practitioner brings his or her own unique personal characteristics or ‘way of being’ (way of expressing the core conditions) into the counselling relationship. Wosket (1999) defines therapeutic ‘use of self’ as “the operationalisation of personal characteristics so that they impact on the client in such a way as to become potentially significant determinants of the therapeutic process” (p. 11). However, this description of ‘use of self’ appears quite deliberate rather than natural; Tootell (2010) makes an important clarification to the definition of ‘use of self’ as not solely an intention:

The participation of the personal self of the therapist in the therapy process is a combination of both an aware, intentional use of self, such as in some forms of self-disclosure; and a more spontaneous, affective participation of the therapist’s personal self in the therapy process, such as when a therapist responds without premeditation (p. 5).

It is the latter ‘use of self’ to which I refer in this study. Ehrenberg (1996) offers a helpful clarification when she deciphers between being genuinely receptive and open toward clients versus taking on an “assumed stance” of these qualities because this is what a ‘good’ therapist does. This reflects an earlier

discussion on the difference between ‘doing’ counselling and ‘being’ a counsellor. Tootell’s (2010) usage of ‘use of self’ is as a response coming from emotional understanding of a particular moment. Yet how is this emotional understanding developed? Not through conventional learning of counselling theory and techniques.

The importance of developing ‘use of self’ as a psychotherapist as opposed to learning theory and techniques of therapeutic practice is widely supported. Wosket (1999) expresses that many therapists could become more effective if they directed their attention away from the models and processes originally taught to them and instead acknowledged their own unique helping attributes that otherwise may be diminished by relying too much on theory. Symington, author of *The Making of a Psychotherapist* (1996) does not doubt that the theoretical models that the trainee psychotherapist is taught during a training course are essential ‘tools of the trade’. However, he argues that if a psychotherapist’s learning is only academic knowledge, it will be meaningless and hold no value in therapeutic work; he states that theories used and interpretations made should be “a true echo of [the psychotherapist’s] own inner personal self” (p. 47).

Tootell (2010) reiterates Safran and Muran’s (2000) warning that if interventions are separated from an ability to respond spontaneously on a moment-to-moment basis, they may inhibit therapeutic effectiveness. Consequently, techniques can be taught but care should be taken so that they do not become “disembodied, reified and decontextualized” (Tootell, 2010, p. 342). Not only does a focus on acquisition of skills and knowledge seem to counteract creativity and imagination (Cayne & Loewenthal, 2004), but as Symington (1996) writes, the psychotherapist must be equipped to meet the emotional conditions of the client such as separation, loss, grief, and trauma: “The development of a person’s emotional capacities is clearly central to any psychotherapy training, and without it all intellectual striving to master concepts becomes a hollow endeavour” (p. 11).

Ehrenberg (1996) writes on the topic of analyst emotional availability and vulnerability such as the level of what analysts are willing to risk emotionally in relation to clients. She believes there are

ways in which analysts permit or prevent certain kinds of emotional contact with patients that may define the level of therapeutic work that will be possible. Brown (2012) writes on behaviours around avoidance of vulnerability and the courage it takes to be vulnerable. She defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (p. 34) and explains how vulnerability may remain feared and avoided because it cannot be predicted, controlled for, explained or known without risk. However, this comes at the cost of connection. Cayne and Loewenthal (2007) acknowledge how, if the person learning psychotherapy is splitting themselves from their own difficulties, techniques and theory can easily be learned as a way to emotionally distance their self from the other. Whatever may be affecting a practitioner’s emotional availability with clients is something that must be addressed explicitly according to Ehrenberg (1996). Symington (1996) and Wheeler (2007) admit that engaging with their own vulnerability, despite how uncomfortable this can be, provides the foundation for good practice.

The crux of this review of literature is:

Who we are as a person, our developmental and cultural history, how we relate to others, our ideological beliefs and practices, in short, the subjectivity of our self, both known and unknown to us, is the most important gift (or hindrance) we bring to our helping practice (Tootell, 2010, p. 11).

As a budding counsellor faced with an overwhelming amount of research stressing the importance of developing my ‘use of self’, I found very little guidance concerning how I could go about learning this. Wosket (1999) proclaims that despite the growth in interest in the individual therapist’s contribution to the effectiveness of the therapeutic process, so far, little has been written or researched on *how* a therapist might develop and use helpful personal characteristics in his or her counselling practice. This is an area where my study contributes to literature in counselling and psychotherapy.

Before I begin looking into how a counsellor can learn to develop his or her therapeutic ‘use of self’, it is necessary to look at what may obstruct this learning. This review of literature considers that a counsellor’s development of his or her therapeutic ‘use of self’ may be obstructed by his or her relationship to uncertainty.

There has been a lot of previous research on the way unknown phenomena are experienced in therapeutic practice and different experiences have been given various names and meanings depending on the author's theoretical orientation. However, if experiences of 'uncertainty' are defined, they are no longer uncertain. Furthermore, there are many different forms of uncertainty. Using any one term to account for a variety of experiences has the danger of narrowing or limiting understanding of the possible experiences that could emerge. Therefore, the purpose of this study is not to name such experiences but to explore experiences that may be difficult to understand. In this study, I take a heuristic stance of exploring a question of uncertainty rather than conceptualising uncertainty. The concern is with one's experience of uncertainty as existential uncertainty rather than uncertainty as a phenomenon. This premise is based on the theoretical assumption that an individual's unique background, including previous experiences of uncertainty will influence his or her thoughts and feelings in subsequent experiences that cannot be known and therefore, will be subjectively interpreted. Uncertainty is known on a tacit level to be unknowable. What is unknowable cannot be known conceptually, but as I come to discuss, understanding of one's own experience of the unknown can arise by being willing to stay with the experience, to think about it, rather than evade it. As I discuss next, uncertainty can be a state of being that brings us increasingly closer to our own truth. Alternatively, fear of uncertainty could influence a counsellor's reliance on cognitive or intellectual knowledge as a way of avoiding vulnerability. Therefore, I suggest learning to tolerate uncertainty might lead to development of a counsellor's therapeutic 'use of self' and influence therapeutic outcome.

### **Tolerating uncertainty**

There are many people who look for certainty, of whatever kind, to support and sustain them in a world that frequently confronts them with uncertainty (Casement, 2011, pp. 289-90).

Norcross (2009), in her counselling psychology masters thesis, "*The Challenge of Uncertainty in Psychotherapy: Depth psychological voices from the field*", asserts that very few statements can be made about uncertainty, except that it is part of human existence and the experience of it is familiar to psychotherapists regardless of theoretical orientation or level of experience. Practitioners are repeatedly

faced with uncertainty such as how counselling actually works (Norcross, 2009) or if one is any good at it (Cayne, 1998 in Cayne & Loewenthal, 2004). Carswell (2007) illustrates uncertainty in the counselling process:

One of the major characteristics of work as a counsellor is the capacity to work with the unknown, we do not know who is going to come for counselling, nor what they are going to say to us, nor how we are going to feel about them and their narratives, nor how we will respond (para. 5).

As Norcross (2009) acknowledges from Brothers (2008), the experience of uncertainty is inherent to the relational perspective of counselling practice because one is directly and continually confronted with the uncontrollable and unpredictable otherness, or alterity of an 'Other' (the client). Furthermore, counsellors regularly have mysterious and inexplicable 'paranormal' experiences while thinking together with clients (Durant, 2002; Halberstam & Leventhal, 2008; Hopcke, 1997; Norcross, 2009; Rosenberg, 2006; Ryklina, 2012; Totton, 2007).

Carswell (2007), Cayne (2005), Norcross (2009) and Ryklina (2012) write that such uncertainty can rouse feelings of insecurity and anxiety in the counsellor that are associated with existential uncertainty. Uncertainty acts as a reminder that death is inevitable; it may be the one certainty of life and the greatest uncertainty of life surrounds it, not knowing when death will come. Death is the final unknown. Carswell (2007) and Norcross (2009) describe how counsellors may attempt to counteract these uncomfortable feelings by looking for certainty and taking on a position of greater knowledge than the client. Using the language of psychoanalysts, Casement (2011) admits that many analysts allow their thinking to be dominated by the theories they feel guided by and can be extraordinarily sure in how they claim to understand their patients. He states that far from approaching each patient with an open mind, analysts might interpret patient material based in theory, rather than make spontaneous and mutual discoveries along with their patients. However, as Symington (2007) mentions, if the psychoanalyst observes the analysand from a firm basis in theory, then the analysand will have theoretical solutions imposed on them that may or may not be correct.

Application of theory that is already well known to a practitioner can be a defence against the experience of not understanding something that may be less familiar than he or she wishes to assume and may be confusing and difficult to talk about (Casement, 2011; Ryklina, 2012). Labelling inexplicable experiences with familiar terms allows them to be thought of as solved problems rather than remain a mystery (Casement, 2011; Totton, 2007; Wosket, 1999). For example, Totton (2007) writes how terms such as 'countertransference', 'parallel process' or 'projective identification' are applied to unknown, 'inexplicable' processes between client and therapist. In humanistic or body psychotherapy, unknown processes may be put into terms of energy such as sensing the quality of the client's energy or the energy between client and therapist. He concedes that even the word 'process' has become an all-purpose term for everything mysterious and inexplicable about psychotherapy. Cayne and Loewenthal (2007) reference Yalom (1989) who argues that reliance on schools of thought is a way for the therapist to avoid the anxiety of not knowing and ensure certainty in the face of the unknowable other in a difficult experience.

A counsellor's avoidance of his or her own feelings associated with uncertainty impacts his or her ability to help clients. Clients often come to therapy in times of transition precisely because of their difficulty containing and managing their own anxieties triggered by uncertainty of the unknown (Carswell, 2007, Voller, 2010). Many therapists write about their experience of clients casting them in an all-knowledgeable role (Norcross, 2009). Norcross refers to the work of Guggenbühl-Craig (1971, p. 77) who recognises that a therapist can feel pressured to provide answers and create change when he or she is seen as "the great helper...the source of all hope" by clients in search of easing their own anxiety. Casement (2011) writes that many practitioners are willing to satisfy this search for sureness for a patient. This may be because as Symington (1996) points out, people tend to avoid emotional pain in others because it brings us face to face with our own pain:

The psychotherapist is constantly up against patients who want to be cured but, at the same time, do everything in their power to avoid mental pain. The patient will develop every kind of subtle device to try to persuade the psychotherapist to steer away from the area of pain. The



psychotherapist will be greatly tempted to go along with this because he himself [sic], being human, will also want to avoid pain (p. 51).

Brothers (2008, p. 13) captures an analyst expressing his difficulty staying with experiences of uncertainty even at the cost of the therapeutic relationship:

Nowhere do I experience what I shall call existential uncertainty more starkly than in my own consulting room. It is there, as waves of this nightmarish dread wash over me and my patients, that I feel most tempted to dig my heels into the dry shore of analytic certitude [...] as if for a life preserver—at times, I am ashamed to admit, by trying to squeeze a patient into some preconceived theoretical pigeonhole so that the very things that make him or her (and our relationship) unique are smoothed over (from Norcross, 2009).

Voller (2010) writes that if the therapist and the client both have difficulty tolerating uncertainty, then therapists are simply paralleling their clients' positions. Exploring the client's dilemma in any depth becomes too terrifying a prospect for either to take on and as a result, the work will remain formulaic to feel manageable (Voller, 2010). Casement (2011) acknowledges the irony of people seeking help from a practitioner whose mind has become "imprisoned". Therefore, Casement asks, "What do we do with the certainties of psychoanalysis that can so imprison the minds of practitioners, and which in turn can threaten to imprison the minds of those who come to them?" (2011, p. 293).

As Betts (2007) and Norcross (2009) mention, the pressure of the need to know interferes with the process of counselling, whether it is the practitioner's need to know or the client's need for someone to know. According to Voller (2011), it is imperative for a therapist to be able to engage with client uncertainty experientially; clients will ultimately be more enriched by developing ways of relating to uncertainty as a result of seeing and experiencing it in the therapy process. Acknowledging uncertainty in the counselling room and actively engaging clients in uncertainty is important to all the practitioners that Norcross (2009) interviewed. Not only does this keep the work open to possibilities but also practitioners model acceptance of uncertainty for their clients, which serves to normalise uncertainty as part of the process (Norcross, 2009; Voller, 2010). It becomes something to be aware of rather than fended off with dread. This empowers clients to heal themselves, something they can be deprived of if uncertainty is not embraced in therapeutic work (Norcross, 2009).

A practitioner's work has to do with pulling back from the known, meeting client uncertainty, containing it, and re-evaluating former certainties (Voller, 2010). Therefore, for a practitioner to be able to work in uncertainty, it may be fundamental to learn to tolerate his or her own uncertainty, which he or she may not be aware of, to be able to help the client tolerate theirs (Betts, 2007; Carswell, 2007; Gardner, 2008; Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971; Norcross, 2009; Symington, 1996). However, Casement (2011) makes an important point and one that is relevant to counsellors and clients and pertinent to this study. He writes that analysts often learn to recognise patients' mechanisms of defence (whereby they protect themselves from some aspect of their own minds preferring to 'deny and disown') rather than being able to recognise their own defences (p. 288).

British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1897-1979) asked, 'What determines an individual's ability to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity?' He responded to this query differently from early psychoanalytic theorists. Instead of being a theory involving raw drives and impulses, Bion attempted to describe the experience of the analytic situation itself (Norcross, 2009; Ryklina, 2012; Symington & Symington, 1996). In short, Bion was concerned with the analyst's task of overcoming what he knows (cognitive knowledge acting as a possible obstruction) in order to be at one with what is, or the emotional truth of the analytic experience at any given moment (that might otherwise be being defended against) (Ogden, 2004). He was concerned with "the process through which truth evolves and the process through which truth is blocked" (Symington & Symington, 1996, p. 3). In an attempt to understand this process, he uses symbols *O*, *-K*, and *K*.

### **The ultimate reality, *O***

According to Ogden (2004) and Symington (2007), Bion referred to ultimate reality or the absolute truth in and of any object as *O*. *O* can be known about, its presence can be recognised and felt but it cannot be known or understood conceptually because it is constantly changing. However, it is possible to be at one with it. *O* is a transformative experience of becoming or a state of being in the present moment. Other examples Symington (2007) gives of transformative experiences that are become rather than known are

love or being filled with awe. Coming into contact with *O* is described as the fleeting but explicit momentary experience of having come across a larger reality than is normally perceived. However, Symington (2007) writes how the truth may be fended off, resisted and avoided because it also brings awareness of the human condition, that life is painful and finite.

Symington and Symington (1996) write how all people may consciously or unconsciously believe that it is better not to become *O*, so they keep a barrier of some sort between them and their truth. It is a lot easier to preserve familiarity and maintain a current understanding than to face the “catastrophic anxiety that occurs at moments of psychic change” (Symington & Symington, 1996, p. 131). The capacity to be in the present moment, according to Ogden (2004) is obstructed by a wish to protect the self from ‘its blinding glare’. So, “we seek shelter from the *O* of the present moment in the shadows of memories of what we think we know because it has already been, and in our projections of the past into the future” (Ogden, 2004, p. 292). Therefore, as Symington (2007) writes, people can convince themselves that life is comfortably familiar and predictable.

Bion (1962) refers to the need for certainty in order to alleviate the frustration of not knowing as *-K*; *-K* is resistance to knowledge (*K*) of the truth (*O*). Ogden (2004, p. 291) defines Bion’s *K* as an attitude toward *O* and the only means of engaging with and transforming *O*, which involves “experiences of thinking, feeling, perceiving, apprehending, understanding, remembering and bodily sensing”. According to Felch (2007), *-K* is “fending off experience that might lead to the unknown... [and] clinging to what is known and refusal to let this knowledge be disrupted by new experience” (p. 61, as cited in Norcross, 2009). Resistance to uncertainty can be expressed as knowing about an experience intellectually and using knowledge defensively rather than becoming (Norcross, 2009; Symington, 2007). Being attached to ‘fact and reason’ or a need to know and explain acts as an obstruction or barrier, blocking truth (Betts, 2007).

## Being without memory and desire

Bion (1970) attempts to help to describe and facilitate the whole mental attitude that is likely to give as much access to *O* as possible. This requires the ability to continually relinquish all preconceptions such as the client's history and psychoanalytic concepts and theories to wait without reaching for the solution or understanding, to "eschew memory and desire" (p. 31), so the practitioner can *stay with* uncertainty and unknowing (Symington & Symington, 1996). Casement (1985) offers some specific examples of how an analyst might fall into the trap of memory and desire: relying too much on material from previous sessions or the patient's history, looking for evidence to support a particular idea about the patient, trying to make the patient better in a particular way, and attempting to understand the patient in a way that is not found in the present session (p. 195). This may relieve the anxiety of facing the unknown but does not help the patient to learn from the confusion and ambiguity of analytic work (Norcross, 2009; Symington & Symington, 1996).

Bion writes that the therapist needs to not only be without memory and desire but also have what he called *faith (F)*. This refers to faith that there is an ultimate reality and truth—the unknown, unknowable, "formless infinite" or *O*. Faith is characterised by "an attitude of pure receptiveness...an alert readiness, an alive waiting" (Eigen, 1985, "Faith in O," para. 4). In this state of receptivity, being unobstructed and open, the analyst allows what is known to fall away and has faith that the emotional reality of the moment (*O*) will emerge. This is faith in "what might *become* possible if we can find sufficient faith to remain open to it" (Charles, 2003, para. 7, original emphasis).

'Being without memory and desire' is predominantly a psychoanalytic concept and would be considered common practice of the person-centred approach to therapy. However, this does not mean that because a counsellor identifies as person-centred that he or she automatically knows how to be 'without memory and desire'. This requires the capacity to tolerate uncertainty, which depends on the person of the therapist, irrespective of his or her theoretical orientation. To address how a counsellor learns to tolerate uncertainty, I begin with psychoanalytic literature where the capacity to tolerate

uncertainty is most commonly written about and is referred to as *negative capability* (Symington & Symington, 1996).

### **Negative capability**

Negative capability at first seems to be a contradiction in terms that cancel each other out (French, 2001). However, as French (2001) defines, the root meaning of 'capable' is 'containing' or 'spacious'. It is derived from the Latin word *capax*, meaning 'able to hold much' like how the volume of a container is measured by its internal 'negative' space. Therefore, the 'negative' in the term 'negative capability' represents receptive space within the self when reliance on knowing is apprehended creating a negative capacity or potential to discover meaning.

The poet Keats (1818), originator of the term 'negative capability', used it to define a key attribute of a great poet: "...when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason... in order to allow, as yet unimagined creative possibilities to emerge" (Taylor, 2010, p. 403). Norcross (2009) and Taylor (2010) portray 'negative capability' in therapeutic practice as an open state of mind or a willingness to accept the emotional disturbance that arises as a consequence of an open attitude. This is a difficult form of knowing that is necessary for getting closer to the ultimate reality of oneself and requires letting go of knowing and tolerating the anxiety of uncertainty. To have the capacity for 'negative capability' is to be able to tolerate being in the uncertainty of the present moment (Ogden, 2004).

### **The ability to think**

Bion emphasised *thinking* as crucial to tolerating frustration rather than evading it. He distinguishes between thinking and merely having thoughts: "One cannot think his [sic] thoughts, that is to say that he has thoughts but lacks the apparatus of 'thinking' which enables him to use his thoughts, to think them as it were" (1962, p. 84). Bion came to the realisation that true thinking is unconscious and that what we normally call 'thinking' is objective thought, what he refers to as 'after thinking'. After thinking is using thought in a way that can relieve the tensions created by intolerance of frustration, to avoid

experiencing, whereas thinking is associated with not attempting to know (Cayne, 2005). As Cayne points out, “certain kinds of thought can actually be a way of not thinking” (p. 51). In the words of Symington and Symington (1996), “For Bion, thinking is a transformation” (p. 143). It is a prerequisite for becoming *O* (Norcross, 2009; Rosenberg, 2005; Symington & Symington, 1996).

### **Reverie and containment**

Bion (1962, 1970), as relayed in the works of Ogden (2004), Norcross (2009) and Cayne (2005), writes of an analytic state of mind of receptivity, a method for attending to the unknown by refraining from trying to understand, called *reverie*. In reverie, the analyst makes him or her self as open as possible to experiencing what is true and attempts to find the words to convey something of that truth to the patient. Reverie is concerned with the kind of thinking that Bion termed *alpha function*. An example of alpha function through reverie is when a mother (or counsellor) tolerates and metabolises an infant’s (client’s) raw sensory data that are “things in themselves” or “undigested facts” termed *beta elements*. These are distressing and cannot be thought about (e.g. uncertainty). The alpha function transforms beta elements into *alpha elements* or meaningful experience (Cayne, 2005; Norcross, 2009; Ogden, 2004; Symington & Symington, 1996). The mother (counsellor) becomes the *container* for the emotional experience that the infant (client) cannot tolerate and is evacuating from his or her own mind through projection into the mother (counsellor). The emotional experience is then *contained*. The mother does this through her own alpha function or her reverie: “This depends on her capacity for taking inside her own mind the as yet intolerable emotional experience of the infant, for tolerating it, processing it and ultimately giving it back to the infant in a modified form so it is now tolerable for him [sic]” (Symington & Symington, 1996, p. 67). As Norcross (2009) explains, internalising the containing function, that is, reverie and alpha function, is the basis of the infant’s, (and therefore, client’s and counsellor’s) ability to contain and make meaning of their own experience (Bion, 1962, p. 31). If the mother (or counsellor) does not provide the containing function for her child (client), the child will not develop the ability for self-containment, thus limiting his or her ability to “psychically hold onto intense states without reacting to them or evading them” (Bion, 1962, p. 27).

### **'K' link**

Bion refers to learning and knowing in an emotional sense through being in relationship with others as the 'K' link (Symington and Symington, 1996). We need relationship to change our relationship to uncertainty, which means tolerating the uncertainty of relationship to create the change that we can also want and fear simultaneously (French, 2001; Symington & Symington, 1996). A patient's resistance in therapy may therefore be understood as "a hatred and fear of transformations in *K* because this may result in closer approximations to becoming *O*, or at-one-ment with *O*" (Symington & Symington, 1996, p. 119). Bion believed that psychoanalysis was one way of being in contact with *O* (Symington & Symington, 1996). Bion, who is open to believing in mystical experiences, suggests getting as close to a mystical experience as possible and that this occurs through close relationship with another. Psychoanalysis is an investigation of such a relationship and it attempts to open both partners to the mystical experience (Symington & Symington, 1996).

Counsellors may unconsciously avoid experiences of uncertainty and therefore limit their clients' ability to think about their own uncertainty and fears of the unknown. As an example of movement into *-K*, Felch describes an analyst who cannot tolerate the patient's projected affect on his or her own uncertainty and "may move toward reactivity and management of the situation" (2007, p. 59 as cited in Norcross, 2009). Therefore, as Norcross (2000) writes of Bion (1962), an analyst's ability to contain and make meaning of his or her own experience could be essential in times of clinical uncertainty. As relayed in Norcross (2009), Bion (1983, p. 27) addressed the importance of the analyst becoming *O*: "In so far as the analyst becomes *O* he is able to know the events that are evolutions of *O*". I argue that the counsellor with the capacity to tolerate uncertainty and be closer to his or her own emotional experience or *O* can use his or her self most effectively in therapeutic practice. A counsellor, who fears uncertainty, whether consciously or unconsciously, therefore might struggle to use him or herself therapeutically in the counselling relationship. It is the therapist's capacity to be in uncertainty that keeps the space open for the client and more of the client can be attended to (Voller, 2010). New thoughts and meaning can

then emerge that may have been blocked and missed because of the client's (and therapists) fear of moving into the uncertain space.

Voller (2010) explains that a variety of therapeutic approaches use terms similar to 'negative capability' such as: 'being without memory and desire' (Bion, 1967), 'presence' (Rogers, 1980), 'the creative void' (Perls, 1989), 'unknowing' (Spinelli, 2006), 'mindfulness' (Williams, Kabat-Zinn, Zindel, Segal & Teasdale, 2002), and 'counter-transference'. Betts (2007) wonders about the relationship between negative capability and similar ideas such as 'reverie' (Bion, 1970, Ogden, 1997), 'poised attention' (Reik, 1948), and 'evenly suspended attention' (Freud, 1912, Ogden, 1997). To these can be added 'faith' (Eigen, 1985) 'noncertain' (Casement, 2009; 2011), 'receptive', 'patient' (Bion, 1970) 'empty' (Wosket, 1999) 'openness' (Rosenberg, 2005), 'authenticity' (Schmid, 2002) and 'immediacy' (Wosket, 1999). The main difference between these similar terms and negative capability according to Voller (2010) is that negative capability is "a personal quality of actually being, or having learnt to become capable of being, in uncertainty" (para 5). Just as presence is a precondition for a person-centred 'way of being', Betts (2007) and Voller (2010) argue that negative capability is a way of being in uncertainty and is a precondition to these other ways of being, including Rogers' 'presence'. With this understanding, a counsellor needs to learn to tolerate uncertainty before being able to exemplify the therapist characteristics included in the "common factors" that Lambert and Barley (2001) found determine positive therapeutic outcome.

Tolerating uncertainty is considered by many therapists to be intrinsic to good practice (McLeod, 2011) regardless of theoretical orientation. However, like Voller (2010), I have found a lack of studies enquiring into the personal quality of being able to or having learned to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity. Unhelpfully, Betts (2007) and Rosenberg (2005) relay Bion's position that you cannot try at negative capability or any state of receptivity; if you try for it, you will never reach it. This reflects Tootell's (2010) clarification of 'use of self' as being unpremeditated. It is this perceived lack of research in the field of psychotherapy and counselling to which this study contributes.



**Counselling practice and research: Empirical studies of tolerating uncertainty**

I found three empirical studies directly related to my interest in learning to tolerate uncertainty in counselling practice. Norcross (2009), Ryklina (2012) and Rosenberg (2005) each carried out qualitative studies on uncertainty in the counselling process. Through interviews with practitioners of counselling, these authors, also practitioners of counselling, seek understanding of uncertainty as a phenomenon and the occurrence of experiences of uncertainty in the counselling process. Their findings further exemplify the importance of the counsellor learning to tolerate uncertainty in therapeutic practice. This includes how experiences of uncertainty may affect the counsellor and the implications of a counsellor's response to uncertainty on the counselling process.

Norcross (2009) interviewed three analytically trained psychotherapists from differing theoretical orientations. She asked how they respond to uncertainty in their clinical work and used phenomenological data analysis to draw out shared themes. She then presented a structural description of experiences of uncertainty. Some of Norcross' emergent themes from the interviews included that experienced practitioners: strive for a mind-set of uncertainty, flexibility and exploration; strive to normalise uncertainty in their patients by modelling acceptance of uncertainty so the patient can grow to be accepting of uncertainty; may experience discomfort and doubt in moments of unknowing about patients; learn from uncertainty in clinical and life experience and how this makes it easier to tolerate uncertainty in clinical work; and believe that uncertainty is an inevitable and significant part of the human experience. All of the analysts described a mutual process of growth or transformation through the process of sitting with uncertainty, such as the 'otherness' of their patients.

The analysts spoke of the necessity of space in clinical work for movement, for what is unknown or not yet understood that is likened to having space for play: "the play is within the analyst's own minds and thinking, trying to make room for something else, room to be surprised, and one could say, room for the Other" (Norcross, 2009, p. 67-68). They expressed the belief that certainty can undermine or suffocate their therapeutic work with patients resulting in loss of possibilities when clarity and

concreteness are sought too quickly. Norcross' study also revealed that although the analysts strive to hold a perspective of curiosity and wondering that she calls a 'voluntary uncertainty', they all encounter moments when a deeper, profound uncertainty, an 'involuntary unknowing' about their patients presents itself. Norcross finds that the latter can trigger varying degrees of emotion such as anxiety. However, Norcross (2009) concludes that when practitioners permit uncomfortable emotions to affect them and are able to tolerate them, these feelings can become a valuable resource to expand their range of knowing. Norcross' main findings indicate that uncertainty is an important and inevitable experience that is challenging and enriching, impacting therapists outside as well as inside their counselling rooms. Personal experiences of uncertainty over the course of the practitioners' lives are mentioned as having influenced their development of a mind-set of uncertainty (p. 97).

Ryklina (2012), in her counselling psychology doctoral thesis, "*The Role of Anomalous Phenomena in the Therapeutic Process: An exploration of counselling psychologists' experience*" addresses how counselling psychologists make sense of and manage experiences they cannot understand in the therapeutic process, which she refers to as 'anomalous phenomena' (AP), and the role such experiences play in therapy. Ryklina (2012) acknowledges that these experiences have an emotional impact on therapists and can be experienced through sensations in the body. They could be generated within the therapist in the therapeutic process or between client and counsellor as they relate to each other. Ryklina (2012, p. 11) gives examples of other terms that could be used to describe anomalous phenomena such as an 'intuitive moment' or 'unconscious communication' (Freud, 1915), 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi, 1969), a 'peak experience' (Maslow, 1971), 'implicit moment of relational knowing' (Lyons-Ruth, 1998) or a 'sudden sense of the Unknown' (Cayne, 2005). Ryklina brings awareness to the struggle with trying to define the indefinable. She acknowledges how giving a language to things that are inexplicable can be an attempt to avoid confusion and lack of understanding through application of explanation, yet this could override inherent meaning. She wonders what knowledge counselling psychologists rely on to make sense of AP and highlights the importance of a relationship between use of theoretical knowledge and reflexivity. She suggests that anomalous

experiences have to remain indefinable and therefore practitioners need to let go of a desire to make sense of them. She finds that reflexivity, spirituality, and the ability to be in touch with one's unique 'centeredness' or 'core strength' (p. 96) plays a larger part in the understanding of AP than does an intellectual ability to recognise and to know.

Ryklina (2012) uses semi-structured interviews with eight counselling psychologists each with at least ten years experience in clinical practice, together with interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the interview data. Ryklina (2012) finds that experiences of uncertainty in counselling psychology can trigger practitioners' personal issues and she wonders how these issues might affect the way he or she perceives and handles 'anomalous phenomena' in the therapeutic process. She discovers that counselling psychologists could be anxious in the therapeutic encounter when they are faced with something that cannot be known. The way counselling psychologists experience phenomena that cannot be understood strongly relates to anxiety, fear and uncertainty, drawing attention to deep feelings of vulnerability and insecurity and provokes an unintentional defence reaction to remain safe and secure. Consciously or unconsciously, a practitioner may want to strive to know to relieve the anxiety of uncertainty (Ryklina, 2012). The practitioner might "block" new experiences, which can even prevent awareness of AP. Due to the connections she discovered between AP and personal issues of her participants, Ryklina draws attention to the importance of exploring what kind of feelings AP evoke and what impact they have on the therapeutic process. Emerging from Ryklina's interview data, participants' acknowledgment of personal issues and their ability to work through them appeared to have a significant impact on the counsellors' abilities to experience AP. If AP are considered to be an important part of the therapeutic process, then as Ryklina (2012) concludes, the exploration of personal issues associated with uncertainty automatically becomes an essential part of professional development.

Rosenberg (2005) approaches her Master of Health Science thesis entitled, *'Knowing Reality: Psychotherapists' and counsellors' experiences and understandings of inexplicable phenomena while working with clients*, as a hermeneutic phenomenology and limits her study to psychoanalysis and

analytic psychology. She explores eight practitioners' accounts of lived experience of a range of 'inexplicable' phenomena that occur when working with clients. She defines inexplicable phenomena as experiences that are not explainable in the Cartesian worldview that says the world is objectively real and measurable. According to this dominant worldview, her interviewees appear to know things that are not possible to know or perceive. Rosenberg states that her study raises questions about what it is to know beyond knowing mentally, to also consider bodily or emotional experiences and 'intuitive impulses'. She looks into the counsellors' states of being they were in at the time of the experience and explores the meanings they make of their experiences, within their psychotherapeutic, spiritual and cultural worldviews.

A participant in Rosenberg's (2005) study describes a state of consciousness that enables him to become in touch with 'knowledge' that is present all the time, but which he would not usually be able to 'access'. Rosenberg (2005) finds that 'inexplicable' phenomena may occur when psychotherapists and counsellors are in an 'open', meditative state in which the boundaries between self and world seem lessened and time and space are experienced differently. She found the meaning the analysts made of their experiences varied according to their spiritual and theoretical worldview. However, the experiences were consistently interpreted as receiving a communication from, or being attuned to, the unconscious mind or a spiritual intelligence or source of knowledge of the patient. According to Rosenberg (2005), when we are ready to see what the unknown has to offer, we can begin by developing our awareness of its presence. Otherwise, we may be unconsciously blocking the unknown from our awareness and possibly also blocking meaning from the counselling process. Rosenberg (2005) aims to gain knowledge of inexplicable experiences so that such experiences may be able to be understood and used more effectively by practitioners in the future.

### **Critical reflections**

Most influentially, these studies describe practitioners' responses to uncertainty as obstructing or facilitating the therapeutic process, and conclude that the capacity to tolerate uncertainty may be unique

to each individual. Ryklina (2012) discovers the emotional impact of experiences of uncertainty on therapists pertaining to their vulnerability and insecurity and how a practitioner may want to 'strive' to know to relieve the anxiety of uncertainty. Norcross also writes of practitioners "striving" for a mind-set of curiosity and wondering that I understand to be what she calls 'voluntary uncertainty'. However, I understand this as contradicting Bion's 'negative capability' that requires being without memory and desire, a state of mind that cannot be tried for. Norcross also writes of an 'involuntary unknowing'. It is this unknowing that Norcross (2009) reports triggers practitioner anxiety. Norcross (2009) concludes that being able to tolerate this anxiety can expand a practitioner's range of knowing that I understand Rosenberg (2005) refers to as 'inexplicable knowing'. Ryklina (2012) and Rosenberg (2005) acknowledge how a need to know can act to 'block' awareness of new experiences and meaning from the therapeutic process. Norcross (2009) states that certainty suffocates therapeutic work and that space needs to be left for what is unknown which is likened to space for movement or play.

When counsellors and psychotherapists can learn to be in an 'open', meditative state Rosenberg (2005) writes, they can access an intuitive knowledge and inexplicable experiences are more likely to occur. Furthermore, being in uncertainty and modelling acceptance of it can help normalise uncertainty for the patient who can then also develop acceptance of it. This can be a mutual process of growth and transformation (Norcross, 2009). Norcross acknowledges how experiences of uncertainty occur both inside and outside the counselling room and her interviewees mention that personal experiences of uncertainty over the course of their lives have influenced developing a mind-set of uncertainty. Ryklina (2012) concludes that personal issues triggered by experiences of uncertainty need to be acknowledged, explored and worked through as an essential part of professional development.

Although phenomenological studies such as Norcross (2009), Rosenberg (2005) and Ryklina (2012) bring awareness to the importance of being capable of working in uncertainty, these studies do not address *how* practitioners can learn to develop themselves in the ways they have revealed as important to therapeutic practice. For example, how do counsellors learn from personal experiences of

uncertainty? How would a counsellor work through personal issues triggered by uncertainty? What Rosenberg (2005) does not reveal is *how* do practitioners become ready to see what the unknown has to offer? How can a counsellor ‘use experiences of inexplicable phenomena effectively in the future’?

I have found an important link between therapeutic ‘use of self’ and learning to tolerate uncertainty that involves a counsellor’s emotional capacity and availability. However, I have discovered a lack of research into the relationship between therapeutic ‘use of self’ and working in uncertainty in therapeutic practice, how ‘use of self’ can be developed, as well as how counsellors learn to develop the capacity to tolerate uncertainty. In response to this lack of practical research in the field of psychotherapy and counselling, I undertake a case study that looks at:

*How a counsellor learns to tolerate uncertainty and bring his or her self more fully into the counselling relationship and what implications this has on therapeutic work.*

### **Life and counselling practice**

Central to my understanding of how to develop the capacity to tolerate uncertainty or have negative capability is that it is “not an immediate mental discipline to be engaged in just prior to the session, but rather a way of life” (Symington and Symington, 1996, p. 169). Negative capability hinges on the developing self-awareness of the counsellor rather than being grasped conceptually. For the poet Keats, developing negative capability involved “books, fruit, French wine, fine weather and a little music out of doors played by someone [he does] not know” (Voller, 2010, para 1). Voller (2010) clarifies that practitioners find their own specific context for development of negative capability. As Betts (2007) asks, “What is the relevance of how we live our lives on our capacity to find ‘negative capability’ in a counselling session?” (para, 30). If uncertainty occurs both inside and outside the consulting room and the capacity to tolerate uncertainty involves personal experiences and personal issues, this learning will be an individual process for each counsellor. How can this individual learning take place?

Before I can attempt to respond to how a counsellor can learn to tolerate uncertainty and develop his or her therapeutic 'use of self', I turn to Levine (2002) who discusses how learning occurs in general, making an important epistemological point that true learning does not come from simply having experiences but involves a willingness to think about experiences which means facing uncertainty.

### **Learning from reflecting on experiences**

Levine (2002) explores the relationship between learning, thinking and doing in his article entitled *Thinking About Doing: On learning from experience and the flight from thinking* in which he asks 'How does one learn from experience?' and 'What beyond having the experience do we need to do if we are to learn from it?' In Levine's case study involving a course on group dynamics he taught to university students, he implemented a teaching module on the premise that "learning occurs when pre-existing patterns of thinking and doing are disrupted, and when that disruption is associated with a reflective process" (p. 1253). Levine writes of having assigned an unspecified group project to his students. The experience of uncertainty attributed to a lack of structured learning, as well as being in a group, raised anxiety amongst the students. The students, tapping into an impulse to adapt to life in groups, presumably took on learned familial roles associated with alleviating anxieties provoked by group experiences. Levine's students' desire to learn about groups by simply being in a group rather than reflecting on their experience was perceived as a flight into doing which became a defence against learning or a flight from learning.

Levine concludes that his students' failing to learn from experience is linked to fear of thinking. He references Christopher Bollas' 'unthought known' (1987), which refers to experiences that are in some way known to an individual who is unable to think about them. In Levine's case study, the students avoid reflecting on the meaning of their assumed group role; the role is enacted without thinking about it. Their 'doing' protects the 'unthought known' from being thought about. Levine (2002) expresses that:

If we are to understand the flight from thinking, we need to understand better the nature of the uncertainty that promotes anxiety [...]. We cannot, then, assume that not knowing always results in anxiety of the kind that impedes thinking. Rather, this result develops when not knowing has a specific emotional significance (pp. 1260-61).

Various authors, including Cayne (1995) as mentioned in Cayne and Loewenthal (2004), recognise how reflective forms of learning generate anxiety, in part due to the requirement to question one's self. Yet being able to think about experiences is the key to change. If this reflexive process is being avoided, then experiences will simply be repeated (Levine, 2002). According to Levine (2002), learning from experience through thinking is the basis for creative living; its purpose is to discover what might be rather than reproduce what is. Levine (2002) references Waddell (1998, pp. 27-8) in response to what is required to learn from experience: "The capacity to actually have the experience, in the sense of staying with it... rather than seeking to dismiss, or to find some way of bypassing it". Without honest reflection, experiences are being avoided. As Levine (2002) writes, this entails tolerating uncertainty: "Only if we can stand not knowing, can we come to know through a process, and will thinking and learning be possible" (p. 1261). Learning will only occur if we are willing to think about our experiences; this requires confronting our own uncertainty rather than avoiding it. Therefore, learning to be a psychotherapist does not arise from learning *about* uncertainty or by simply having experiences or hearing of others' experiences of uncertainty, but is contingent on the practitioner's own level of engagement with the unknown.

### **The path to learning**

Symington (1996) acknowledges the inevitably painful insights that accompany emotional curiosity yet states that this "is the path that the would-be psychotherapist needs to tread" (pp. 16-17). Counsellors require an inner searching activity so that their cognitive knowledge becomes assimilated to their emotional self in such a way that each reflects the other. It is only then, as Symington (1996) states, that knowledge becomes the possession of the 'true self' and therefore finds its true function. As Jung says, "Learn your theories as well as you can but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your own creative individuality alone must decide" (Jung, 1953, p.73). In



experiences of uncertainty, all we have as counsellors is ourselves. This highlights the importance of a counsellor developing his or her authentic creative individuality or as Wosket (1999) says, his or her unique helping characteristics or ‘use of self’:

If we are open to moving beyond what our theory and training have taught us we are capable of responding to our clients in ways that we do not know we possess until they are drawn from us by each inimitable relationship with each unique client (Wosket, 1999, p. 32).

Skovholt and Rønnestad (1992) describe a potentially uncomfortable and painful post-training process where the therapist faces a decision of what professionally imposed rigidity to shed and which elements of the internal self to express, a “loosening and internalising” (p. 104). As inauthentic aspects of self are “sloughed off”, a more natural and congruent self emerges that is better able to acknowledge the reciprocal nature of therapeutic work. Practitioners may avoid this demanding and uncomfortable stage of authentic professional development and adopt an alternative route, the easier path referred to as ‘the pseudo-development path’ (p. 103). Counsellors that take this path continue in an external and rigid mode of applying processes and procedures advocated by a theoretical model or school. Skovholt and Rønnestad (1992) claim that if counsellors do not dare to take the difficult path, they may experience “a growing alienation between the authentic personal self and the evolving professional self” (p. 103).

Wosket borrows Peck’s (1989) reference to a poem by Robert Frost in her claim that to discover our true potential as therapists, we need to look to our clients and ourselves and be prepared on occasion to take ‘the road less travelled’. She refers to such a road in therapeutic practice as ‘unorthodox practice’, defined as when therapists depart from ‘the norms and conventions’ of their training and put themselves out on a limb to work in original, innovative and intuitive ways. This is not post-training learning that simply comes with having more experience, but is attributed to what we are open to learning about ourselves in these experiences. This is perhaps why Wosket (1999) invites therapists to look at their personal histories and begin to make explicit connections between personal characteristics and their potential for the therapeutic ‘use of self’. As I explore in the next chapter, this study became a response to her invitation.

**Research-practice gap**

Tootell (2010) draws on the work of McLeod (1990a, 1990b) and Muran (2002) and concludes that few practitioner-researchers decide to study their own lived experiences, including subjective and intersubjective experiences of the therapy process. This perceived lack of research includes making linkages with personal histories and showing how life and counselling practice influence one another (Tootell, 2010; Wosket, 1999). Studies exploring therapists' perceptions of their own development are also limited (Cayne, 2005) such as the healing, growth and personal development that the therapist gains from counselling work (Tootell, 2010; Wosket, 1999); this too is a 'road less travelled'.

McLeod (2001, 2011), in response to what he calls a deficit 'crisis' in the field of counselling and psychotherapy that has left a widening 'gap' between research and practice, calls for more research that can help cultivate the relationship between research and practice. He clarifies that this 'gap' results from researchers feeling the need to adhere to conventional academic structures for reporting research findings and therefore failing to communicate the relevance of their research to their own practice. They lack appreciation for how valuable doing research, particularly qualitative research, can be for enriching practical understanding and clinical skills. As I explore in the next chapter, addressing my question of how counsellors learn to tolerate uncertainty and develop 'use of self' requires a methodology that does not leave the practitioner-researcher and his or her own experiences out of the research, thus upholding its practical relevance to counselling.

**Role of theory**

In consideration of the role that theory will play in this study as to not contradict the topic of tolerating uncertainty itself, I draw from Casement (1991) and Symington and Symington (Symington, 1996; Symington and Symington, 1996) who write of not using theory to *try* and understand or explain an experience. From a humanistic perspective, Wosket (1999) writes how the 'use of self' should precede use of theory and this is how I understand my developing orientation of therapeutic practice. Symington (1996) arrives at the statement that "theory shall always be the servant of the phenomena and not the

other way round” (p. xv). This reflects Casement’s (1991) view of therapy, that cognitive knowledge should be “servant to the work of therapy and not its master” (p. 9). If theory plays a supportive role to experience to further discover meaning, then the experience is not ‘solved’, being passed off as explanation, but continues to evolve.

Many authors comment on how difficult it is to comprehend Bion’s ideas and Ogden (2004) relays that tolerating not knowing is necessary in the reading of his texts. Symington and Symington (1996) advise that to approach Bion’s ideas, one must assume the very stance that Bion recommended in clinical work - to be without memory and desire, to let go of all existing psychoanalytic concepts and theories (p. 1). Lapinski (2007) states that Bion only makes sense if we can relate his ideas to ourselves and to our patients in our own unique way and Ogden (2004) contends that there is little doubt that this is the way Bion would have hoped for his work to be read. According to Symington and Symington (1996), Bion adopted Buddha’s attitude that “his teachings should not be believed because he taught them but should instead be tested against experience” (Symington & Symington, 1996, p. 178). Therefore, my study is not one of trying to make sense of, know, or be an expert on Bion’s ideas, but to be ‘beyond Bion’, by considering his ideas and how they may relate to my experiences in life and inform my counselling practice. Cayne (2005) relays that subjective awareness is crucial in thinking about the world and can be seen to be the means by which we learn rather than by being able to repeat someone else’s theory. This is best represented by beginning with experience and moving into theory as described by Cayne and Loewenthal (2011):

Rather than rely on theory in order to understand, we need to be able to find our own ways of speaking through and of our experience, which is not to say that existing theory does not have something to offer as long as we are able to continually re-examine it (p. 37).

## **Conclusion**

There is a tension that exists in psychotherapy between one discourse that favours traditional educational approaches that focus on what is provable or the known aspects of learning, and one that supports relational learning associated with the humanistic and existential movement that recognises the

unpredictable and inexplicable (Cayne & Loewenthal, 2007). The latter includes recognition of the counsellor's personal characteristics that have been found to be more significant to therapeutic outcome than theoretical knowledge or techniques. For these characteristics to be healing, the capacity to tolerate uncertainty appears to be a precondition. Like Bion, I am interested in "the process through which truth evolves and the process through which truth is blocked" (Symington & Symington, 1996, p. 3). This includes how a counsellor's capacity to access his or her own truth may affect the clients' process.

Ryklina (2012) discovered the importance of the practitioner working through personal issues of insecurity and vulnerability triggered by being in experiences of uncertainty. Ehrenberg (1996) states that whatever may be affecting a counsellor's emotional availability with clients must be addressed explicitly. In consideration of Levine (2002), if learning occurs through reflecting on the uncertainty of experiences, then learning to tolerate uncertainty could come from reflecting on the uncertainty of experiences of uncertainty. If as Norcross (2009) acknowledges, uncertainty occurs both inside and outside the counselling room, then experiences to be reflected on include those from counselling practice, and life.

In this chapter, I have discussed how a counsellor assimilating knowledge of his or her emotional self, a road less travelled but one that needs to be tread, hinges on developing the capacity to tolerate uncertainty. I have not found a counsellor's treading of this path represented in psychotherapy and counselling research. There is a lack of research into how counsellors learn to tolerate uncertainty and develop their 'use of self', perhaps because this cannot be known or proven. However, as I argue in the next chapter, it can be shown.

### CHAPTER III

## **METHODOLOGY: SWIMMING INTO THE UNKNOWN CURRENT OF HEURISTIC SELF-SEARCH INQUIRY**

### **Introduction**

A lack of research on practitioners' therapeutic 'use of self' that holds practical relevance in psychotherapy and counselling was noted in the previous chapter. In response, this study seeks to explore *how a counsellor learns to tolerate uncertainty and bring his or her self more fully into the counselling relationship and what implications this has on therapeutic work*. I have divided this chapter into three parts. I discuss my methodological decision-making process in **Part I**, which led me to a self-study. I introduce my ontological (beliefs regarding the nature of truth and being) and epistemological (understanding of how one comes to know this truth) philosophical position outlining a qualitative approach to research known as Moustakas' *heuristic inquiry*. Heuristic research is a method of self-inquiry, and is therefore subjective and supports 'use of self' as a practitioner-researcher; it is further defined by its requirement for the researcher to surrender to uncertainty and access tacit rather than cognitive knowledge. Therefore, for practitioner-researchers, heuristic inquiry offers valuable learning that is relevant to the counselling process. I further clarify my methodological approach according to a critique of heuristic inquiry, as *heuristic self-search inquiry* (Sela-Smith, 2002) that reinforces my decision to be my only research participant.

**Part II** of this chapter includes an introduction to each of Moustakas' six phases that characterise a heuristic process: "initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination of the research in a creative synthesis" (1990, p. 27). These phases include how the main research question was formulated as well as introduce my use of personal and professional experiences as vignettes and reflexive writing. I also address my ethical considerations and concerns and how the substantive chapters of this thesis are organised. Finally, in **Part III**, I describe how I have come to

include artwork, in particular, layers of a painting in my presentation to portray my learning process and findings.

### **HEURISTIC SELF-SEARCH INQUIRY PART I:**

Ever since Bion first introduced Keats' (1918) concept, psychoanalysts have eagerly taken up the idea of tolerating uncertainty or negative capability because, "it captures the emotional involvement of an observational, open attitude that psychoanalysis requires" (Taylor, 2010, p. 405). Henderson (2011) relays that the frequency with which negative capability is used in psychotherapy literature demonstrates the need for ways to think about it, but it also demonstrates a lack of ways of thinking about it. In counselling, there is increasing interest in learning to tolerate doubt and uncertainty and facing the unknown as a focus of counselling research which contrasts the traditional emphasis learning places on knowing (Cayne, 2005). However, most counselling and psychotherapy literature that addresses the unknown is written in a knowing way of how others have conceived the unknown and draws conclusions based on similarities between others' experiences.

Norcross (2009), Rosenberg (2005) and Ryklina (2012) each admit their methodological decision to use phenomenological analyses of interview data was probably an unconscious desire to find answers to their own experiences, motivated by a desire to decrease their anxiety and find reassurance. Symington and Symington (1996) state, "intolerance of the unknown and our need to snatch at something that explains it smothers the opportunity of coming to the truth" (p. 182). This reinforces what Rosenberg (2005) and Ryklina (2012) discover in their interviews of other practitioners, that counsellors avoiding uncertainty are blocking experiences and meaning. Perhaps the same can be true of how practitioner-researchers approach research. As Bright (1997) acknowledges, "if meaning is being treated as if it were nothing but objective, there is no space for the opposite – subjective meaning – to emerge" (p. 625). In Taylor's (2010, p. 404) words, "there is no space in which truths may be discovered". Using qualitative research as a way of coming to know by drawing themes from across interviewees' experiences takes away from the experience of the individual. Each participant has a

unique context that has contributed to their learning how to be in uncertainty or has influenced their difficulty with uncertainty.

Ryklina (2012) addresses the limitations of her chosen methodology and the necessity of an explorative approach to researching experiences that cannot be known. She expresses how in her analysis of interview data she needed to explain her conclusions and summarise her study in one complete picture that did not correspond to the reality of her multi-layered findings. Her aim for clarity and conceptualisation of her research interfered with the real essence of the phenomena that her participants described. She relays that: “The boundaries that have to be placed in order to produce the research project destroyed the beauty of the unidentifiable experience” (p. 133). As Ryklina (2012) discovers, in contrast to how she approached her study, a counsellor learns from exploration of his or her own response to experiences of uncertainty, not through seeking others’ experiences and drawing similarities. She continues that with reflection, it could be possible to make subjective sense of the experiences. Ryklina (2012) concludes that a process of exploration of the experiences of not knowing and having hopes and beliefs are more significant and useful than a formal process of interviews, analysis and conclusion. Such an exploration would provide the space for self-awareness and self-discovery for the counsellor. Ultimately, discovering what influences one’s response to uncertainty will differ for each counsellor, that is, each counsellor will have his or her own truth that requires an explorative process to unearth.

### **Use of self as practitioner-researcher**

As discussed in the previous chapter, research clearly documents that not training, theoretical orientation, level of experience and or operating procedures (Wosket, 1999), but a counsellor’s personal qualities are the most significant contributing factor to positive psychotherapeutic outcome.

Furthermore, some therapists are distinctly more effective at promoting positive client outcome in comparison to others (Lambert and Barley, 2001, 2002; McLeod, 2011; Skovholt & Jennings, 2004; Wosket, 1999). Naturally one asks, what makes these practitioners differ? Wosket (1999) suggests

opening up the possibility that the way forward for the profession of counselling and psychotherapy may be to direct attention to the contributions of individual therapists and away from the common factors to be found across all schools of therapy. This ‘way forward’ can be reflected in research in psychotherapy and counselling in the form of subjective research. Subjective research could explore how a counsellor developed his or her own unique helping attributes for a spontaneous, unpremeditated ‘use of self’ (Tootell, 2010) that comes from an inner awareness or emotional capacity and how this development hinges on the capacity to tolerate uncertainty.

As Carswell (2007) states, “If counselling is to work, counsellors must be able to tolerate their own fear of the unknown and maintain the capacity to think whilst under threat from the incapacitating forces of anxiety” (para. 6). Each practitioner will have his or her own personal issues associated with experiences of uncertainty (Ryklina, 2012) so learning to tolerate uncertainty, consistent with what Betts (2007), French (2001) and Voller (2010) write, will be a uniquely individual process. Therefore, the counsellor’s personal process should be highlighted in response to questioning *how* a counsellor learns to tolerate uncertainty and how this affects development of therapeutic ‘use of self’ or a counsellor’s ability to bring themselves more fully into the counselling relationship. I argue, ontologically speaking, that the current study necessitates my own ‘use of self’ as a practitioner-researcher to meet my study’s intention. Consequently, it is best approached as a self-study. This study therefore becomes a response to Wosket’s (1999) invitation to look at my personal history as a means to developing insight into my therapeutic ‘use of self’. I agree with Wosket (1999) that if the self of the counsellor is significant to therapeutic outcome, then the personal story of the therapist is crucial to the practice of any forms of therapy. According to Wosket, researching my own work with clients can help me to discover more about my therapeutic ‘use of self’ (1999). This learning might take place if I am willing to access my emotional awareness associated with uncertainty by thinking about experiences (Levine, 2002).

With the position that truth is subjective, comes the recognition of the value of inner knowing or what West (2001) writes that Polanyi (1962) called ‘tacit knowledge’. Tacit knowledge accepts that



there are always aspects of learning that are beyond knowing and regards the unknown as something that we do not know that we know (Cayne & Loewenthal, 2007). Tacit knowledge exists for the most part outside of ordinary awareness and is the foundation on which all other knowledge stands (Sela-Smith, 2002). Embracing that which is known but not necessarily conscious supports a psychology of uncertainty; it indicates a willingness to consider experiences that elude certain understanding (Brothers, 2008 as cited in Norcross, 2009). If coming to terms with one's relationship to uncertainty is a way of overcoming resistance that otherwise may stand in the way of being able to use one's self therapeutically, then accessing tacit knowledge, beyond reliance on cognition, becomes possible when one is open to whatever may emerge; this requires a researcher's 'negative capability' in research or an epistemology of 'not knowing'.

### **An epistemology of 'not knowing'**

Cayne (2005), who writes on developing a methodology for exploring the unknown in the acquisition of therapeutic knowledge, recognises the way various writers attempt to explain the unknown as if known whereas others attempt to hold open, what she refers to as, the question of the unknown of the unknown. The latter is consistent with the current study's epistemological position or my view on how reality or subjective truth as outlined above can be accessed. An epistemology of 'not knowing' (Cayne, 2005; Cayne & Loewenthal, 2007) that is exploratory rather than explanatory could hold the space for uncertainty, for what cannot be explained and what may then have the space to make itself known. Cayne and Loewenthal (Cayne, 2005; Cayne and Loewenthal, 2004) discuss an opening up of space rather than formulating a story to fit a particular epistemology: "This space [can lead] to possibility and the unknown in research and learning from experience" (Cayne and Loewenthal, 2004, p. 355).

Cayne (2005) argues it is the researcher's responsibility to hold and contain modes of evading anxiety in order to enter into 'reverie', Bion's (1962, 1970) concept defined in the background section of this study (p. 24-25). A researcher maintaining reverie for studying the unknown has the potential to both notice and allow thought in the face of anxiety that is generated in the presence of the unknown.

It is an approach of attending to what arises without controlled analysis or theoretical explanation. This reflects the epistemology of the current study, of thinking honestly about experiences and feelings that arise rather than avoiding the truth of not knowing (Levine, 2002). Similarly, Finlay (2008) writes of a researcher's 'openness' as being prepared to be surprised, awed and generally receptive to whatever may be revealed:

Openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see, and understand. It involves respect, and certain humility toward the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility. This openness needs to be maintained throughout the entire research process, not just at the start (p. 5).

Etherington writes of a 'not-knowing' attitude as being ideal for researchers who truly seek new knowledge, rather than trying to find knowledge that fits with, and reinforces, previously chosen theories about people and the world (2004). If counsellors learn through experience, then an opportunity to learn to tolerate uncertainty would occur through, as Cayne (2005) writes of Schön (1987), being immersed or plunging in experiences of uncertainty. This is the opportunity presented by heuristic inquiry.

### **Heuristic inquiry**

Heuristic inquiry is associated with the work of Clark Moustakas, an American psychologist who was a contemporary of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. He was interested in phenomenology and also in the key tenet of humanistic psychology, that each person has an inner potential for growth, creativity and meaningful self-expression (McLeod, 2011, p. 205). Moustakas (1990, p. 15) defines heuristic inquiry as:

A process that begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illustrate or answer. The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand oneself and the world in which one lives. The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet virtually with every question that matters personally there is a social and perhaps universal significance.

The assumption that underpins heuristic research is that the passionate involvement of the researcher will enable a depth of sustained examination of a topic that will go beyond what could be achieved

through mere use of the methods of inquiry associated with phenomenology. For Douglass and Moustakas (1985), among many perceived differences between phenomenology and heuristic research is fundamentally that heuristic research does not just acknowledge the position of the researcher but retains the *essence* of the person in the experience. Heuristics is understood to be an adaptation of phenomenological inquiry because it explicitly acknowledges as its main focus, not only the 'lived experience' of the researcher but also the transformative effect of the inquiry on the researcher's own experience as researcher rather than focusing on the phenomenon itself (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Hiles, 2001; Moustakas, 1990; Wall, 2006). The meaning of the observed phenomenon will be particular to the individual researcher and also constantly changing. Therefore, the importance of learning as a process rather than a product is crucial in heuristic inquiry and fittingly, the epistemology associated with heuristic inquiry is a process of discovery.

The term heuristic is a derivative of the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning, "to discover" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 58). Moustakas (1990) acknowledges that Polanyi's (1983) contribution to understanding tacit knowing is an essential component of heuristic inquiry. All heuristic discoveries are based on the power of revelation in tacit knowing. Moustakas writes (1990):

When we curtail the tacit in research, we limit possibilities for knowing. We restrict the potential for new awareness and understanding. We reduce the range and depth of meanings that are inherent in every significant human experience [...]. The tacit dimension underlies and precedes intuition and guides the researcher into untapped directions and sources of meaning (p. 22).

Heuristic research is "a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of an experience [...]. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). This allows the researcher to experience the intensity of the phenomenon. Sela-Smith (2002) recognises the interiority of experience that she refers to as the '*I-who-feels*'. She states that feeling, perhaps not commonly noted as significant in research, is now the dominant component of the research, despite profound efforts of the intellect to interfere with this. Sela-Smith (2002) claims that access to the tacit dimension is achieved through feeling experiences and reveals that with Moustakas' heuristics, perhaps for the first time in human science research, the discovery of both the experience and the

'*I-who-feels*' is possible in ways that conventional observation, description, explanation, discussion, or reflection could never deliver. Sela-Smith (2002) identifies a need to set aside the skills of controlled, objective observation and surrender to embracing subjective experience and to leap into the unknown. According to Etherington (2004), Moustakas (1990) and Sela-Smith (2002), if able and willing to relate to the data in this way, the researcher opens his or herself up to creative and transformative opportunities for personal growth and new learning. Sela-Smith (2002), in observation of her heuristic process, shares that:

The goal... is to come to a deeper understanding of whatever is calling out from the inside of the self to be understood.... In the process, the researcher is coming to understand something within that is also a human problem or experience. The researcher uses the data within to lift into awareness the experiences that are felt and trigger the *being* of the researcher. In this lifting, an awakening, a greater understanding, and personal growth occur and combine to produce self-transformation (p. 64).

A study on how a counsellor learns to tolerate uncertainty requires a suitable methodology that allows for uncertainty and thus supports my epistemology of learning from experience.

### **A methodological structure for uncertainty?**

It may seem paradoxical if Moustakas' phases are viewed as a methodological structure for a process that he himself states must take place free from methodological structures if it is to be authentic.

However, Moustakas' (1990) six phases in the heuristic process are not intended to imply a linear process but to be used to locate self and guide research:

Each of the phases in heuristics is not a labelled step on some ladder that lists all the necessary components of that step. Each phase is experiencing stepping off and falling into feeling all that occurs in the process. Each phase is an uncharted territory because the ground is not formed until the inquirer creates both the territory and the path by surrendering to the unknown and then walks the territory to discover what is there (p. 64).

Moustakas does not give the researcher direction for "letting go and falling into the river or swimming into the unknown current" that occurs when one leaps into the unknown. He only says that it "may be refreshing and peaceful, or it may be disturbing and even jarring" (p. 13). Moustakas acknowledges that

“methods of heuristic inquiry are open-ended [...] each research process unfolds in its own way”

(p. 43):

Learning that proceeds heuristically has a path of its own. It is self-directed, self-motivated, and open to spontaneous shift. It defies the shackles of convention and tradition...It pushes beyond the known, the expected, or the merely possible. Without the restraining leash of formal hypotheses, and free from external methodological structures that limit awareness or channel it, the one who searches heuristically may draw upon the perceptual powers afforded by...direct experience (Moustakas, 1990, p. 17).

However, Sela-Smith (2002) identifies where confusion and conflict within Moustakas' heuristic inquiry may arise that seems to contradict the very premise on which his methodology is based.

Sela-Smith (2002) observed that although Moustakas' method is derived from his own internal search when he was faced with a personal crisis, his focus shifts to abstract observations about his problems. In this way, he becomes focused on the 'self-responding-to-feeling' rather than staying with the '*I-who-feels*'. Sela-Smith (2002) writes that Moustakas avoided facing his resistance to personal pain by refocusing attention outside of him for answers. This unacknowledged resistance, according to Sela-Smith (2002), potentially marks Moustakas' own ambivalence to fully immerse in his experience. This led her to a critique and clarification of Moustakas's method, as well as a critique of the dissertations of twenty-five students who had followed his methods. Sela-Smith (2002) recognises that following an introduction to the phases of heuristic inquiry, Moustakas contradicts the theory on which his methodology is based. The application portion of his methods involve co-participants and is an external, procedural process rather than remains in uncertainty. Therefore, researchers will either choose to place importance on the '*I-who-feels*' or procedures. What Sela-Smith (2002) discovered was that only three of the students had successfully sustained their focus internally and actually completed their dissertations as heuristic research. In heuristic inquiry, the researcher is the subject of investigation and his or her lived experience provides both the context and the content of the research. The other dissertations were mixed with use of accounts of co-participants forming primarily phenomenological inquiries. In response, Sela-Smith developed a new method she refers to as heuristic self-search inquiry.

### **Heuristic inquiry vs. heuristic self-search inquiry**

Heuristic research differs considerably from other methodologies in that it views the researcher as a participant. Many approaches to qualitative research, including even Moustakas' heuristic inquiry, encourage the use of co-participants. In this study, I am my only participant. This decision stemmed from my ontological position that learning to tolerate uncertainty is a uniquely individual process and I did not feel that my study would benefit from including the experiences of others. As Sela-Smith (2002) discusses, use of the experiences of others may only act as a distraction and resistance from staying with my own experience or my '*I-who-feels*'. Resistance to a reflexive process is addressed by Sela-Smith (2002) as difficulty staying with the '*I-who-feels*' and this acknowledgement is what separates heuristic self-search inquiry from Moustakas' (1990) heuristic inquiry.

I have adopted heuristic self-search inquiry as the most appropriate qualitative research method for my topic of learning to tolerate uncertainty. To be in a heuristic process, and before full discovery can occur, Sela-Smith (2002) clarifies that resistance needs to be let go of and ambivalence overcome. I feel it is important to retain as much of the '*I-who-feels*' as possible because as Sela-Smith (2002) acknowledges of her own experience, and I explore in my learning process throughout my study, my 'feeling self' had long been dissociated from my 'thinking self'. I wanted to remain aware of my possible resistance toward my feeling self. This is consistent with my epistemological stance of learning from thinking about experiences as opposed to avoiding feelings associated with uncertainty (Levine, 2002). Heuristic self-search inquiry is an attitude framed by critical concepts that will be addressed in the final chapter of this work.

### **Methodological rationale**

There were many different paths I could have taken in my research once I decided I wanted to work with my own experience. Moustakas' (1990) heuristic inquiry was not a methodology that I had decided at the outset of this study but was recognised retrospectively following trial and error with other autobiographical approaches to qualitative research that did not seem to leave room for or acknowledge

the importance of uncertainty. Originally, I wanted to use the initial phenomenon I experienced that I labelled 'coincidence' or 'synchronicity' before it became more generally 'uncertainty' and related literature to prove the importance of being receptive of experiences that cannot be explained. This way I could keep my own vulnerability from entering into my writing. However, I struggled to write my research because I felt I was not being honest with myself. When I allowed myself to be aware of the paradox of trying to know about not knowing and how this desire fuelled my defence against uncertainty by filling the uncertain space with knowledge, I realised how these other methodologies did not fit my inquiry of how learning occurs. Furthermore, my experience of a meaningful phenomenon of uncertainty was not isolated. As I tried to write about it, other experiences came along and I realised I was not reflecting on and trying to capture one incident; I was writing about a learning process I was still in.

I came to recognise eventually through reading Moustakas' (1990) *Heuristic Inquiry*, that my learning counselling beyond theoretical knowledge and practice techniques was indeed heuristic. My study was not about what I had come to know, but about my process of discovery. Heuristic inquiry is a natural learning process that takes place if the learner can let go of a need to know and control the research process and instead give in to uncertainty and see what arises. The more I was able to let go of a need to label my research process with an existing qualitative methodology and try to squeeze my learning into its parameters, the more personal learning arose. My learning was occurring through letting go of the need to know and prove myself as a counsellor and a researcher and instead be in uncertainty. In contrast to other qualitative methodologies that highlight the subjective 'use of self' as a researcher, heuristic inquiry moves beyond focus on the phenomenon; it retains my 'essence' and shows my developing awareness of the importance of learning to not know for professional development. It maintains aliveness in its movement across time that depicts a learning process.

I can see now that heuristic inquiry as a methodology is a framework that not only facilitates learning to tolerate uncertainty and develop 'use of self' as a practitioner of counselling, but as is

evident throughout my study, it also challenges me in a very personal way. It facilitates what I discover to be an important process of personal and professional growth. However, arriving at this realisation required confronting my ambivalence, which is a requirement for heuristic self-search inquiry.

## **Validity**

As Moustakas relays, the heuristic research process is largely undefined, with the researcher's embedded personal question acting as the primary guide. Therefore, its 'validity' is necessarily judged in a vastly different way than other research paradigms. While agreeing that it is important to establish some criteria about how to evaluate the quality of heuristic research, these criteria do not have to replicate the same criteria concerning 'validity' and 'reliability' that are applied in the natural sciences because of the differences in ontological and epistemological assumptions (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Tootell, 2010). McLeod (2011) acknowledges the difficulty in knowing how to evaluate heuristic research because it is a form of communication that values aesthetic quality and playfulness rather than methodological rigour or other more conventional indicators of validity. Like so much of the human experience, my results cannot be scientifically proven but the intent of heuristic inquiry is not to prove but to discover meaning. Therefore, validity in subjective research is derived from what is learned within the experience and meaning discovered (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002). Moustakas clarifies that the primary researcher, who is the only person in the investigation who has undergone the heuristic inquiry from the beginning, makes this judgment (1990).

Sela-Smith (2002) shares that the completion of or end result of Moustakas' phases cannot be the focus; the process can only be directed by feeling: "The researcher surrenders to the feeling in an experience and does not know what will be learned at the time the inquiry is begun" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 83). A researcher's heuristic process therefore shares many similarities to the uncertainty of the counselling process and the counsellor's capacity to 'be without memory and desire', tolerate uncertainty and rely foremost on the emotional capacity necessary for a therapeutic 'use of self':



To participate in this heuristic self-inquiry [...] the researcher must remain internally focused and dwell within the feelings of the tacit dimension, allowing the six phases to unfold naturally by surrendering to the feeling state of the subjective “I”. The researcher must release control and discover whatever the stage has to offer (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 63).

The characteristics of each phase of heuristic inquiry are delineated in Part II of this chapter.

## **HEURISTIC SELF-SEARCH INQUIRY PART II: Introduction to phases**

In part II of this chapter, I introduce the phases offered by Moustakas (1990) that guide my inquiry:

*initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis*. I discuss my data sources, data collection, ethical considerations, as well as the organisation of the remaining chapters that demonstrate my movement through a heuristic learning process.

### ***i) Initial engagement***

As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) mention, autobiographers write about ‘epiphanies’ or significant moments that are perceived to have impacted the trajectory of their lives after which life does not seem quite the same following the event. The experiencer is forced to attend to and analyse lived experience. This call to research is represented in Moustakas’ first phase, ‘initial engagement’, when the research question chooses the researcher:

Within each researcher exists a topic, theme, problem, or question that represents a critical interest and area of search. The task of the initial engagement is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27).

Moustakas (1990) notes how the awakening of the research question comes through an inward clearing, and an intentional readiness and determination to discover a fundamental truth regarding the meaning and essence of one’s own experience: “All heuristic inquiry begins with the internal search to discover, with an encompassing puzzlement, a passionate desire to know<sup>1</sup>, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one’s own identity and selfhood” (Moustakas, 1990,

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<sup>1</sup> In this quote a ‘desire to know’ reflects an internal yearning to discover rather than a need to know to quell anxiety, therefore is not contradictory of tolerating uncertainty.

p. 40). Sela-Smith (2002) writes that it is this intuitive place where the researcher feels a call to discover some internal meaning: “From the moment of the call, the researcher may not even be aware of what needs to be done – only that something is calling out and that to dismiss it is to deny something very important to the self” (p. 65).

Initial engagement invites the researcher to engage in self-dialogue, allowing the phenomenon to speak directly to one’s own experience, to be questioned by it – back and forth, to begin an inner search to discover the topic and question (Sela-Smith, 2002; West, 2001). During this process, the researcher encounters him or her self in a way that is autobiographical and touches significant relationships within their social context, entering into dialogue with the inner experience of the phenomenon. This requires being honest with oneself and one’s own experience relevant to the question or problem. Moustakas (1990) describes the essence of this phase that captures self-dialogue:

Self-dialogue is the critical beginning, the recognition that if one is going to be able to discover the constituents and qualities that make up an experience, one must begin with oneself. One’s own self-discoveries, awarenesses, and understandings are the initial steps in the process (p. 16).

I did not begin this study with a question in mind, only feelings of uncertainty leading up to and including counselling training and beginning counselling practice. The inner searching of the ‘initial engagement’ phase of heuristic study as written in the introduction chapter to this study, eventually came to reveal the research question (West, 2001): *How in my process of becoming a counsellor can I learn to bring my self more fully into relationship with clients and what are the implications of this learning on my counselling work?* According to Moustakas (1990), once the question is discovered and the researcher has defined and clarified its terms, the researcher lives the question consciously and unconsciously, in waking, sleeping and dreaming in order to grow in intimate knowledge and understanding of it (p. 28) during the second phase, ‘*immersion*’.

## ***ii) Immersion***

The ‘immersion’ phase of heuristic research asks for the researcher to immerse or “enter fully into life around the research question and we find synchronous occurrences, when opportunities arise in chance

meetings with people to explore our research question” (West, 2001, p. 129). This calls for sustained focus, self-searching, and ‘indwelling’ or turning inward to pursue intuitive clues and draw from mystery, energy and knowledge of the tacit dimension (Moustakas, 1990). Immersion requires space for ‘focusing’. According to Moustakas (1990), Gendlin’s (1981) focusing as it applies to heuristic research, involves clearing an inward space to enable tapping into thoughts and feelings that are essential to clarifying a question and allowing contact with the core themes that emerge out of the experience. I recognise that when I was in the immersion phase of my heuristic process, a synchronous chance meeting occurred with a client. This is my first experience of uncertainty in therapeutic practice that I write about. I periodically came out of this state of ‘immersion’ into the third phase, ‘*incubation*’.

### ***iii) Incubation***

Incubation is the process in which the researcher retreats from the intense, concentrated focus on the question. Although the researcher is moving on a totally different path, detached from involvement with the question ... on another level, expansion of the knowledge is taking place (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28).

According to West (2001), during incubation it can feel like a mass of data has been accumulated but the researcher is unable to make any sense of it. However, living with the question has provided all the information that the unconscious processing part of the self needs to reorganise new ways of thinking, being, seeing and understanding. Incubation allows the inner tacit dimension to wrestle with the new input gained during immersion to create meaning and form an answer to the research question. Researchers may resist this period afraid that if they lose focus, detach, or walk a totally different path from the question, they will fail to complete their work but it is the surrender to incubation that brings the next phase (Sela-Smith, 2002).

### ***iv) Illumination***

The process of illumination is one that occurs naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition. The illumination as such is a breakthrough into conscious awareness of qualities and a clustering of qualities into themes inherent in the question (Moustakas, 1990, p. 29).

Illumination occurs in moments the inner work of incubation spontaneously breaks through into conscious awareness. It may take place in a single moment, or it may take place in waves of awareness over time (Sela-Smith, 2002). Qualities and themes relating to the research question emerge into conscious awareness without being forced (West, 2001). Illumination might bring new experience, new interpretations, new meanings, or it may correct distorted understandings. This phase could allow for integration of dissociated aspects of the self by providing insight into the meanings that were attached to the internal experience of the past (Sela-Smith, 2002).

#### ***v) Explication***

The fifth phase of Moustakas' (1990) heuristic process of inquiry is that of explication. This is a period of deep clarification and revelation: "The purpose of the explication phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers and meaning" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). Sela-Smith (2002) describes the explication process in the following manner:

The heuristic researcher continues the focusing, indwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure...to recognize meanings that are unique and distinctive to an experience...The entire process of explication requires that researchers attend to their own awarenesses, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgments (p. 68).

Moustakas suggests that we can make use of the method of experiential focusing (Gendlin, 1978) to explore and articulate inner 'felt' discoveries. A continued process of indwelling, self-searching, self-disclosure and reflexivity from the immersion phase, acts as a prelude to putting the change that has occurred during incubation or what has 'arrived' into words in explication (West, 2001). This phase can also be understood as analysis and occurs continuously and simultaneously alongside the other phases.

#### ***vi) Creative synthesis***

The synthesis is not a mere summary of what went on in the study; it embodies an inclusive expression of the essences of what has been investigated. Moustakas (1990) states that creative synthesis emerges out of the researcher's tacit, intuitive powers and inspiration. It is the sum of the outcomes of the whole experience where the question, literature and experience meet, and come together in a meaningful

synthesis: “There is something transpersonal about what emerges that seems to take on a life of its own. It is an amazing time of synchronicity, harmony, connection, and integration” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 69). In the final stage of the heuristic process, through a process of meditation, the researcher uses intuition to come to present the meanings and themes associated with the research question in the form of a narrative as well as poems, paintings, story or other creative form (Ellis et al, 2011; Moustakas, 1990). The intent of a creative synthesis is to construct an “aesthetic rendition of the themes and essential meanings of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 52).

### **Data collection and analysis**

Brinkmann (2012) and Moustakas agree that the initial ‘data’ is within me; Moustakas (1990) relays that the challenge is to discover and explicate its nature. Therefore, the ‘data’ in this study is ‘use of self’. Accessing tacit knowledge or data collection is therefore aided by methods of self-dialogue, indwelling and focusing (previously defined) that occur repeatedly throughout the heuristic phases. Tacit knowledge that becomes conscious through illumination is interpreted and understanding is arrived at during explication.

Panhofer (2011) and Richardson (2000) acknowledge writing as a research method that helps researchers find out about themselves and their topics of investigation. My study underwent a continual review and analysis back and forth between the parts and the whole of the text, which increased depth of engagement and built up an interpretation or understanding of my way of being in experiences of uncertainty. This included countless drafts of reflective writing and rewriting, editing out what became less meaningful. The end of this spiralling occurred when a place of personal meaning, free of inner contradictions was reached. I arrived at an authentic depiction of the essence of myself in experiences of uncertainty, free of ambivalence and present with my ‘*I-who-feels*’. My process of arriving at personal meaning is demonstrated through the writing of experiences followed by a reflexive process.

Experiences of uncertainty that permeate both life and counselling practice are represented as vignettes (short descriptions of a particular circumstance). My first vignette is my initial inexplicable

experience that occurred when beginning work with a client. In support of my epistemological position, experiences must be reflected on, otherwise, aspects of them that cause anxiety could be being avoided. Being reflexive means to live in the moment and continually foster an on-going conversation with the self about the lived experience. Qualitative research acknowledges researcher reflexivity as a main instrument for gathering, interpreting and representing research data such as stories of lived experience. It can be understood as making my subjectivity visible such as demonstrating my capacity to acknowledge how my own experiences and contexts inform the process and outcome of my inquiry (Etherington, 2011). The aim of reflexivity is to, “awaken and inspire researchers to make contact with and respect their own questions and problems, to suggest a process that affirms imagination, intuition, self-reflection, and the tacit dimension as valid ways in the search for knowledge and understanding” (Wall, 2006, p. 4). I identify in my own process what Cayne and Loewenthal (2004) acknowledge:

Perhaps when we write in our journals or in the margin or between the lines, as opposed to a formal project...we do not attempt to think in order to understand but rather write in a naïve or raw way that illustrates our lack of understanding (from Cayne, 2005, p. 31).

My reflexive process that follows my initial experience leads to reflection on personal experiences outside counselling practice and the writing of a second vignette that is autobiographical. To connect with my past experiences, I revisited many personal journals I kept throughout my adolescence and watched a series of home movies my Grandpa had filmed of family events from my birth to age fifteen. Furthermore, I was also working therapeutically with children as part of a programme running in some primary schools in the UK and this also helped me to reconnect with my feelings from my own childhood. Through reflexive writing, I came to realise my first two vignettes, my initial experience of uncertainty in counselling practice and my subsequent autobiographical vignette, had experiences of uncertainty in common.

During my heuristic process, I had another significant experience of uncertainty in counselling work. Now that I was aware of the previous stories sharing an experience of significant uncertainty, this one became my fifth vignette. In comparison to my first vignette, my inexplicable experience from two-

years prior, this experience felt very different. I began wondering what had occurred during the period of time between my first story involving a client and this event that had attributed to this sense of change. I deliberately chose two other experiences from counselling work that felt significant that occurred in between the first and the fifth experiences mentioned in this study to gain a sense of what may have aided this transition.

### **Literature/theory as data**

Theory does not hold a reliable place in learning to tolerate uncertainty. These pages could be saturated with what I already know rather than what I am coming to know. Just as in counselling practice, it is necessary to ask myself in my heuristic process how I may be filling the space with knowledge or even a knowledgeable presence rather than leaving space for meaning to emerge. Therefore, literature or theoretical works were included as data in this study if it had an intense place in my process, inciting emotional excitement as if I had fallen on something meant to be or felt to hold a personal purpose. My experiences are reflected upon and literature adds further meaning without a desire to 'know' or explain by using literature and theories or others' experiences to make sense of my experience. Therefore, the relationship between Bion's concepts of *O*, *-K* and *K* as discussed in my background chapter are not explicitly stated in this study but their inherent presence in my experience of developing the capacity to tolerate uncertainty including my emotional awareness, and reach my personal truth to be able to facilitate my clients' processes can be recognised.

### **Use of client-work**

The primary data for the client-work vignettes was generated using a combination of process notes based on past therapy sessions collected during the period of work with the clients mentioned. The client contracts ranged between six and fourteen months with the most recent one concluding more than one year ago. Following therapy sessions, I made a written record of the most significant events during a counselling session. These recorded notes detail my observations of clients and include fragments of conversations and my own thoughts and feelings such as how well I was able to attune to the client, or

how much I struggled. These notes were then used in supervision. I have drawn from these notes<sup>2</sup> to write the vignettes included in this study and to generate a reflexive process of reconnecting with the feelings of my experiences. I also pulled from reflexive writing pieces in my essays and portfolios submitted on my counselling training course as a sort of diary or journal that Bold (2012) acknowledges as a tool for sustained self-reflection, and Brinkmann (2012) writes of as logging self-observation to aid the development of a self-narrative for deeper exploration of emerging issues in practice. These were used to support other data rather than used as a data set on their own (Bold, 2012). This is described in research literature as a process of generating ethnographic field data or 'field texts' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cresswell, 2009; Raab, 2013) of my counselling practice. Including vignettes of client-work in my heuristic self-search inquiry necessitates ethical considerations.

### **Ethical considerations in my heuristic inquiry**

Upholding my obligations as an ethical counsellor and researcher, I address how I made the decision not to seek my adult or child clients' consent to involve my work with them in this study. This includes the problem of the ethic of consent and the uncertainty of ethical decision-making. I also discuss my decisions regarding my clients' and my own anonymity engaging with the paradox presented between minimising possible harm as well as upholding my potential to contribute to knowledge in counselling and psychotherapy.

Naively, as a novice counsellor and researcher, having chosen an autobiographical methodological approach, I initially set out to apply for the lowest level of ethical approval in accordance with the Code of Research Ethics of the College of Humanities and Social Science at my university. I assumed that my study somehow was exempt from needing extensive ethical consideration because I am not using my clients as participants in my research or representing the clients' own experiences, but *my* experience of our work (Riessman, 2008). I felt surprised when it was suggested by

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<sup>2</sup> In compliance with my standard of ethical practice, any personal information relating to clients, such as my own process notes are stored either on the counselling agency database or my password-protected laptop. My process notes will be destroyed at the completion of this study.



my research supervisor that I apply for full ethical approval, of which I acquired, to account for three main ethical issues: my use of client vignettes including vulnerable children; the emergent nature of my research and therefore an inability to account for or anticipate all ethical considerations before conducting the study; as well as for my own potential psychological stress as researcher. In consideration of my ethical decisions for how I have chosen to write my heuristic self-search study, I have referred to the *BACP Ethical Guidelines for Researching Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Bond, 2004) alongside the *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (BACP, 2002).

‘Who owns the story?’ Traher (2009) asks. Even though I produce a heuristic self-search inquiry and I have rights to my own story, so do the others mentioned. As Tolich (2010) writes, “...you should be reminded that your story is never made in a vacuum and others are always visible or invisible participants in your story” (p. 1599). I have sought permission from my mother to include her in my writing in any way that I found meaningful, and she has read my study and discussed it with me. Others mentioned in my text, such as former clients, also have ethical rights in my research.

My adult clients were informed when they entered into a contract at the counselling agency where I practised that our anonymised counselling work may be discussed in supervision and training contexts such as assignments and research. The clients included in the current study have previously given consent for this. However, a formal process of consent for this study in particular was decidedly not sought. I also include a vignette of therapeutic work with a child client who is potentially more vulnerable than an adult, but still consent was not sought from the child or from the child’s parent. I am aware of existing debates regarding how children can best be engaged in the consent process in a way that maintains their autonomy and is appropriate to their age and competence level to make a choice in their own best interest. However for this study in particular, it would have not been appropriate or in the child’s best interest to seek consent for use of a vignette that highlights my own experience of our work together.

According to Etherington (2007), it is important to write of how I have chosen to present my research using a transparent, reflexive, ethical decision-making process:

I usually discourage students from writing about their own experience. There are many reasons for this. First, the narrative is rarely their own. It includes information about others who are, by association, recognizable, even if their names have been changed. As such, writing about others violates anonymity. If these 'others' do not know about the article, it still violates their rights, for they have not given their permission and they do not have the right of withdrawal or refusal the informed consent provides (p. 141).

McLeod (1999) explains there are two unique ethical dilemmas that present themselves to therapists who research their own clients. Firstly, because counsellors seek to go beyond not doing harm and also hope to enhance client well-being, then it is morally wrong to compromise client well-being for the sake of research; secondly, it creates dual roles of therapist and researcher. It was therefore important to examine if my researcher role might interfere in non-beneficial ways with the therapeutic process. I will discuss these two aspects that pose ethical challenges in the context of my work in particular.

The way my research has developed as emergent rather than having a clearly defined structure for gathering data at the outset, has posed an ethical challenge. I was unable to know at the time of working with my clients that I would come to feel my work with them as relevant to my study. In consideration, I revisited client notes as well as re-imagined client relationship dynamics including themes of the work and how I felt sitting across from each client. If I had approached clients in anticipation of possibly using our work, I would have had difficulty keeping my research interests separate from what my clients wanted to bring to their counselling, especially when I was still narrowing my research topic. I felt concerned my request for consent might dictate what the client felt able to bring into our work. If consent were pre-emptively sought, the nature of the material I would come to use would have been largely unknown at the time. I would have sought consent from clients to write about something that would remain unknown to them until a later date at which I would have to bring the request into our work again. Seeking client consent for my research during our therapeutic work and then following up intermittently with process consent would extend past the therapeutic relationships' ending, possibly

changing the dynamic of the relationships and offsetting the therapeutic potential of having a clearly defined ending.

A request of consent posed to my child client would be potentially confusing to the child and interrupt our child-led work. The therapeutic work took place in a special room within the child's school where the child could have a break from conforming to parental or school requirements of him. This is what I too represented. To be another adult requesting something of this child, even with the intention of honouring the child's autonomy in the consent process, would counteract the therapeutic intent of the space. I did not seek consent of the child's parent. The child's parent gives permission for the child to participate in the therapeutic programme. However, the work with the child is held in confidence between the child and myself and my supervisor. The head of school is informed of any issues regarding the child's safety. This information regarding confidentiality is discussed with the child and is understood to provide a safe space he might otherwise not experience at home. Inevitably, the complex ethical issues that are a consequence of the nature of this messy research can rarely be resolved at the outset and can be difficult to anticipate; concerns of this type may only become issues as they arise (Ellis, 2004; Traher, 2009).

An option pertaining to the ethic of client consent that would suit the emergent nature of my research, would have been seeking informed retrospective client consent following client endings (Clark & Sharf, 2007). Beginning writing about my work with clients following the conclusion of my counselling relationships means my own research did not influence my clients' processes in any way (that I am aware of) but this does not pose as an excuse for not seeking consent. Contemplating seeking retrospective consent, I realised I have no idea what my clients' processes have been like since concluding our counselling such as what feelings about our relationship may have surfaced following our final session or what these clients are left feeling about how we ended. I would not be able to take this into consideration in the sensitive manner I otherwise would to possibly anticipate the potential harmfulness of my request. If a client were to give retrospective consent, the impact on his or her

therapeutic process, which arguably extends beyond the ending of the relationship, and therefore continuing a possibly confusing dual relationship may not be fully anticipated. It is possible that these clients may feel compelled to agree to be a part of my research as a way to reciprocate the offering of help.

The most pressing ethical qualm is a question of beneficence. Novice researchers should be aware that the topics they choose might harm people, Clark and Sharf (2007) and Tolich (2010) write, if not immediately, perhaps some time in the future. As Tolich (2010) writes, “no story should harm others, and if harm is unavoidable, take steps to minimize harm” (p. 1608). I have taken precautions before submission of my study to minimise potential harm including client anonymity and the passage of time. In previous assignments or supervision where my client work has been shared, a client’s identifying information has always been anonymised by minimising my use of contextual information about clients and disguising some details as well as using pseudonyms in an attempt to protect client confidentiality; this practice has also been carried forth into this study. For example, to uphold the child’s confidentiality of issues that may affect his safety, any details of the child’s home life have been omitted from my vignette. The same vignette of therapeutic work with a child client used in this study has been previously shared in other capacities such as teaching modules, presentations, essays and counselling recruitment events within the counselling organisation with permission of my clinical supervisor who upholds the safeguarding of the children within the school and greater community.

In my therapeutic work with both adults and a child, any confidential material of anonymised work will be recognisable to my supervisors and other official placement holders within the organisations where I worked but those previously informed of my work are held by an ethic of confidentiality. The work will not be recognisable to anyone outside the initial context in which it was held. However, I am aware that use of client pseudonyms and de-identifying client material may not fully protect clients (Bond, 2004; Tolich, 2010). This research will be accessible to the public and therefore, the clients mentioned.

The client vignettes I use are unique enough to the relationship and situations that clients would be able to recognise themselves if they choose to access my research. There is the possibility that the client interactions I have written about might be painful experiences for clients to revisit. Clients could read about my personal experience of being with them and if my experience greatly differs from how the client experienced the same event, this could leave the client feeling misunderstood whereas he or she may have felt heard at the time. Furthermore, I might be experienced differently in my writing from how clients needed to see me during our sessions or how I was experienced at the time of our relationship. Clients will have been previously unaware of my personal struggles in our work together which could be very confusing and offsetting. They may read my study and be left alone to deal with their pain, as I will be inaccessible to them to follow-up from this work (Etherington, 2004).

My research will not enter into the public domain until at least two years have passed since ending my therapeutic work with the clients mentioned which will allow the clients and myself some space from our work. Yet it is debated as to whether the passage of time before publication helps protect clients and this would depend on the material and ending specific to each client (Polden, 1998). The reality is, I cannot control for how my writing may be received by clients. Harm is always unavoidable completely because no one can account for what may happen in the future. Engaging with uncertainty has been a learning process throughout my research, rather than something that could be fully accounted for before starting my research. Contemplating ethical struggles in research of this emergent nature has been extremely challenging. Many ethical implications have become evident and have been visited and revisited along the way as I became more open to being aware of them. What I have discovered is that there is no 'right way' or formal rules, but ethical consideration will be unique to each research process and those involved. It has taught me the importance of developing myself as a counsellor and researcher who can make informed ethical decisions but even more so, to trust in my awareness of self and accessing my vulnerable self as opposed to my defensive 'knowing' self that avoids the anxiety of uncertainty. In this decision-making process, I have discovered that contemplating research ethics in counselling and psychotherapy entails admitting not being able to control for what may arise. As

someone who likes control and foresight, I could not have either of these when faced with ethical decision-making and it would be unethical to try to convince myself otherwise. I can, however, use my reflexivity and awareness of my client relationships to make sensitive ethical decisions. It is important to engage with the anxiety of uncertainty I experience when I have an ethical responsibility for others (Brinkmann, 2012).

Of central importance was that this study did not harm or undermine any therapeutic gains already made with clients. The avoidance of harm to clients has been an overriding ethical concern. Therefore, I made my decisions by staying present with my feelings of anxiety and fear of guilt of possibly disrupting clients' lives or clients feeling violated or embarrassed by what I write and how I write it (Etherington, 2004). I learned that my ethical decision-making is reliant on trust in my intuition and implicit knowledge of the relationships I am representing that I was a part of. "Relational ethics", according to Ellis (2007), "require researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences" (p. 3). My developing 'use of self' acted as a tool for making ethical decisions. With these clients' best interest at heart, I have overridden the clients' right to anonymity in my ethical decision-making for a study that intends to show my personal learning process. I can never know for sure that this is the best decision to both protect my clients as well as contribute to practice-based research. The ethical conundrum becomes a process of engaging with and balancing the paradox between consideration of clients potentially being affected and research integrity (Bond, 2004).

A heuristic self-search study deconstructs the conceptualisation of therapy as an "us and them" process; it exposes the practitioner-researcher who is arguably never a neutral, objective observer, in research or in counselling practice. It demonstrates therapist congruence through revelation of being on the same level of vulnerability as the client: "the therapist, like the [client], is human, all too human" (Tootell, 2010, p. 338). Wall (2008) acknowledges the vulnerability experienced by the researcher who reveals him or herself, of not being able to take back what has been said, of not having control over how

readers will interpret what is said, and of feeling that his or her whole life is being critiqued. I write from the position that practitioner-researchers can and should show their humanness (that we are not experts or objective) in research because this mirrors the importance of ‘use of self’ in the counselling room (Tootell, 2010). So even though I have the power of choice on what to include, the more I include, the more whole, understandable, relatable and strong the research will be, but the more exposed and vulnerable I will be. However, “by allowing ourselves to be known and seen by others, we open up the possibility of learning more about our topic and ourselves, and in greater depth” (Etherington, 2004, p. 25) which ultimately benefits my capacity for therapeutic work and ethical decision-making and therefore is more likely to benefit my future clients and potentially readers and their clients. Developing my emotional presence necessary for ‘use of self’ as a counsellor, by sharing my experiences that include work with clients as shown in this study, is an ethical obligation of beneficence.

### **Organisation of substantive chapters**

When my data had been collected and learning and insights had arisen, I decided to organise my writing in a way that would help the reader (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) follow my reflexive process. I now feel that this is perhaps what Moustakas intended of his six phases. I therefore organised each of the five ‘vignettes’ into three chapters with four main components: ‘Introduction’, with each ‘Vignette’ followed by a main heading of ‘Reflection on uncertainty’, and a ‘Conclusion’.

### **HEURISTIC SELF-SEARCH INQUIRY PART III**

In this chapter’s third and final section, I discuss in more depth Moustakas’ final phase, creative synthesis and how I came to include a process of creating a painting that is significant to and represents my learning and discoveries in this study.

### **Findings**

In response to my research question, *how in my process of becoming a counsellor can I learn to bring my self more fully into relationship with clients and what are the implications of this learning process on counselling work*, I discover that as a counsellor, I learn to bring myself more fully into the

counselling relationship by being open to thinking about my experiences, which entails confronting my own uncertainty rather than avoiding it, a process Levine (2002) asserts as necessary for learning to occur. The experiences I reflect on that arise in my heuristic process are experiences of uncertainty in life and counselling practice. In response to the second part of my research question regarding the implications of learning to bring myself more fully into the counselling relationship, I develop the capacity to meet clients in shared uncertainty and vulnerability and this learning allows greater therapeutic depth with clients (Ehrenberg, 1996). My process is one that follows the findings of Ryklina's (2012) study; coming to terms with one's own personal issues triggered by uncertainty may be a necessary process of counsellor professional development.

My heuristic journey shows how my tendency to avoid uncertainty and vulnerability to remain emotionally secure may block my capacity to tolerate uncertainty and therefore, my capacity to be fully in relationship with clients (or anyone), consequently affecting my potential therapeutic 'use of self'. My reflexive writing depicts how I can struggle with uncertainty both inside and outside the counselling room and how letting go of my need to know is overcome in a process of reconnecting with my capacity for creativity and play that I discover in therapeutic work with children. My letting go of a need to know and developing the capacity to tolerate uncertainty brings with it a greater emotional capacity that no longer needs to be defended against and with it, awareness of my unique helping characteristics that define my therapeutic 'use of self' (Wosket, 1999). My heuristic study therefore becomes a process of transformation of my 'use of self' in counselling practice. It is a process of discovery of my unique helping characteristics and how the way I bring myself into the uncertainty of the counselling relationship determines my effectiveness as a counsellor. Presenting my personal findings about my 'use of self' in this heuristic process brings me to part III of this discussion on methodology and Moustakas' final phase that spontaneously occurs to form a *creative synthesis* to represent my story. My creative synthesis retains my '*I-who-feels*'; it does not foreclose my experience of uncertainty but shows how my feelings toward uncertainty have changed.



## **Creative synthesis**

When I was beginning this study and trying to articulate my experience of uncertainty in life and counselling practice, my mom was taking a painting course. She had never painted before. I was sent a series of five stages of her painting in an email. I connected to the completed image that is presented at the start of my study, which I see as a figure standing on a pathway. I imagined myself as this figure. In my response to her message, I wrote: *“I am presented with a path that starts off clear but I am left not sure where it might lead. I don't have any feet. I look ready to go... but I don't know how I'm going to move...”* Alongside my journey of becoming self and counsellor, not knowing where my path may lead, a process riddled with uncertainty, this experience also fit with how I felt embarking on a research journey, as a first-time researcher. Something about this piece of art stayed with me and I realised I kept coming back to it and using it to understand my relationship with uncertainty and the unknown. I found it helpful to imaginatively place myself in my mom's painting, aware of my own feelings that I attached to each of its phases, the textures, brushstrokes and colours as a way of connecting to and understanding my self and how I felt about where I was currently in life and learning. The painting has come to represent many things during this study and as a significant part of my research process, the progression of my mother's painting will appear throughout my study.

My learning to tolerate uncertainty is presented in my study as a journey of self-discovery. Use of this painting symbolises my transition as Wosket (1999) writes of Bugental (1987), from a ‘technician’ of counselling to an ‘artist’ as I am able to increasingly work at the edge of my awareness where the ‘felt sense’ of what is just becoming accessible to consciousness is experienced as an underlying feeling, sensation, image, metaphor or thought. Wosket (1999) writes that this is characteristic of counsellors who are able to, from a secure base in training and personal awareness, confront the unknown in themselves and their clients. A process of reflexive writing and relating literature to each vignette depicting an experience of uncertainty in this study shows a gradual accumulation of learning over time just as each of the five phases of the creation of the painting, one week's contribution layered unto the last come to reveal the final presentation. I feel this represents how Sela-Smith (2002) writes of

Polanyi's (1964, 1969, 1983) view of how experiences are learned from. Each new experience produces another whole that fits together with the earlier ones. Over time, the unique combination of wholes creates the fundamental building blocks of each individual's personal knowledge. Ellis et al (2011) share how the addition of layers in research can represent the emergent process of doing and writing research. I feel this has helped remind me to stay with my present experience rather than seek the outcome. Aligning with my metaphor of a painting, Cayne (2005) writes of a methodology of uncertainty as "an approach of broad brush strokes as a way of responding to the question rather than defining" (p. 29).

I envisage the incremental layers of the painting of a path as Moustakas' heuristic path, a path immersed in uncertainty that guides me toward my developing awareness, my emerging revelations and self-development concerning themes of strength, vulnerability, relationship, playfulness, creativity and connection. It represents reflection on experiences that bring me back to my childhood self and my relationship with my mother as significant to how I came to approach being in relationship with clients and others. Like it began, my study concludes with the painted image of a figure standing on a path. The use of a painting symbolises my relearning to access my vulnerable, creative and playful self; the image is representative of my change in feelings toward uncertainty that I had at the start of my heuristic process.

## **Conclusion**

In the background section of the current study, a counsellor's 'way of being' has been shown to significantly contribute to therapeutic effectiveness. Also, the capacity to tolerate uncertainty could lead to development of a counsellor's unique healing attributes or therapeutic 'use of self'. As discussed, how counsellors learn to tolerate uncertainty and bring themselves more fully into the counselling relationship should be represented in research in psychotherapy and counselling as a subjective study. In this chapter, I made the case for an approach to research on developing the counsellor's 'use of self' and learning to tolerate uncertainty to include the subjective 'use of self' of the practitioner-researcher in an

unknown and unpredictable research process. I advocate experience-near research (Wosket, 1999) and present a heuristic path as arguably an important path for the counselling research-practitioner, who will inevitably be working in uncertainty, to tread; it presents an opportunity to learn whilst immersed in the uncertainty inherent in the research process itself, which like counselling practice, requires staying in the present rather than seeking an outcome.

I introduced my methodological decision-making based on my ontological and epistemological philosophical positions that are most consistently supported by heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) and more specifically, heuristic self-search inquiry (Sela-Smith, 2002). Cayne (2005) summarises my philosophical position undergirding this study in one sentence: "Learning about the unknown [in therapeutic practice] requires time and space rather than a prescribed course, and learning to learn from each unique case" (p. 97). Remaining congruent to the practice of counselling, the current study adopts a methodology that retains 'use of self' as a practitioner-researcher and values learning to tolerate uncertainty from the experience of being in uncertainty and thinking about these experiences, retaining the '*I-who-feels*', which necessitates awareness of possible ambivalence. Like a counsellor in practice, a heuristic researcher can keep his or her own anxieties and need to know from interfering with what wants to emerge and trust in the process. Remaining consistent with the philosophical assumptions on which this study is based, I discussed the grounds for assessing the validity of this study that suit its particular aims.

I briefly introduced Moustakas' (1990) six phases that do not imply a linear process and require the researcher to surrender to the unknown and be guided by feeling. The first phase includes arrival at my research question, the second, third and fourth depict the methods used in my study to reach tacit knowledge and bring it into conscious awareness. The fifth phase includes interpretation or arrival at understanding and putting this personal meaning into words. This heuristic process is represented in vignettes of experiences of uncertainty in life and counselling practice and reflexive writing on these experiences. I disclosed my ethical considerations and how my learning process is organised for

readers' comprehension. I shared the findings of my study and how they are depicted as a result of the sixth phase of heuristic inquiry, creative synthesis.

The following three chapters take readers through my heuristic process of developing my therapeutic 'use of self' by reflecting on my 'way of being' in experiences from life and counselling practice that share a common theme of uncertainty.

## CHAPTER IV

### UNCERTAINTY IN COUNSELLING AND LIFE

#### Introduction

Practitioners of psychotherapy and counselling often face situations in which they cannot rely solely on what they have been taught (Norcross, 2009). In many instances, all practitioners have to rely on is their selves. Effective practice seems to hinge on the counsellor's 'way of being' (Lambert & Barley, 2001, 2002), which I argue may be determined by his or her capacity to tolerate uncertainty, a personal learning process. If according to Levine (2002), learning occurs by facing the uncertainty of experiences and uncertainty occurs both inside and outside the consulting room (Norcross, 2009; Ryklina, 2012), then learning to develop my 'way of being' as a congruent counsellor will include confronting my self in experiences of uncertainty in both counselling practice and life as represented in this chapter. By reflecting on significant experiences of uncertainty, I could develop understanding of how I bring myself (or attempt to not bring myself) into the uncertainty of therapeutic practice. This may lead to learning to tolerate uncertainty.

As if in response to an inner questioning of how I learn to become a counsellor beyond what my counselling course could offer, I have an experience involving a client that I could not have anticipated and can not explain. It forces me to face head-on just how vast uncertainty or an inability to know or even predict or prepare is within the counselling relationship (Carswell, 2007; Norcross, 2009, Totton, 2007). In this chapter, I share this formative, inexplicable, meaningful experience in my counselling work that rouses my curiosity about what Wosket (1999) calls my therapeutic 'use of self'. This chapter includes my *immersion* phase of heuristic research where "we find synchronous occurrences, when opportunities arise in chance meetings with people to explore our research question" (West, 2001, p. 129). In response to an experience of uncertainty I receive as an opportunity, I start my exploration of my research question.

I can conceptually grasp how the counselling relationship works, but I do not develop insight into my 'way of being' in the uncertainty of the therapeutic relationship and process until I begin to reflect on the second vignette shared in this chapter, my experiences of uncertainty from my life. I revisit the history of my most influential relationship, my relationship with my mother and wonder about my influences and experiences rather than strive for explanation.

### **Vignette: The café coincidence**

*A colleague and I met up at a café to discuss our views on counsellor self-disclosure, a hotly debated topic in counselling literature that we chose for a course assignment. Views on self-disclosure seemed to us at the time to be one of the main issues that separate person-centred and psychodynamic approaches to counselling practice. "How much is appropriate to reveal of us to our clients?" we ask as we struggle to form our own position on what I now understand in terms of an unpremeditated 'use of self'. We wonder what it would be like to be as we are in the café, in the counselling room.*

*When I confide to my colleague about having had experiences with clients that feel strangely coincidental, she describes similar experiences in her own work – I am not alone. We are both struck by similarities between our own stories and our clients' that leave us wondering what this is all about; what are we supposed to take from this? We discuss coincidences in therapeutic work in relation to self-disclosure since admitting such a coincidence to a client would be disclosing personal information. During our time at the café, a young man at the next table intermittently interrupts to casually chat with us and then at some point he leaves.*

*The next day, I am sitting in the office of the counselling centre awaiting a new client for an initial appointment. The client arrives late, having had a difficult time finding the centre and I can hear him welcomed into the waiting area by the receptionist. I am eager to capitalise on our remaining time as we have quite a bit of initial appointment material to get through (lots to do!). With the few clients I have experienced beginning with before and including this one, I prepared myself mentally, walking through the steps of the greeting and initial appointment. I cannot help but create a persona for the*

*client based on the minimal information I have prior to meeting them to help ease my anxiety by feeling prepared, expecting and in control. Competent. I wonder if I am actually anything like in my clients' imaginings? Chances are I am not. Clients picture me looking older. 3-piece skirt suit. Hair tied back. Wedding ring. Smile lines. Glasses. Notebook. Fountain pen with inscription marking ten years of counselling experience; I have none of these things. Yet I put on a 'fake it until you make it' persona. I exit the office to claim my client in the waiting area and I sense that he is sitting immediately outside the door. With his form and a pen in my hand and his name on my lips, Paul, I looked up to greet him... It was the man from the café the day before.*

*It was only the previous day that I wondered what it would be like for a client to experience me as I am outside of the counselling room in a setting such as a café and contemplating coincidences in client work, and here I was, experiencing my queries. Apart from acknowledging my recognition of Paul, I immediately go into 'doing' mode. I am trying to somehow surreptitiously channel my ethical guidebook, playing out in my head the most appropriate way to 'handle' this situation. It becomes blatantly obvious that in experiences of uncertainty, my therapeutic toolbox of techniques, guidelines and theoretical knowledge is a process of trying to fit a square peg into a round hole... This experience is trying to tell me something...*

### **Reflections on uncertainty**

Despite being bewildered, intrigued and excited by this coincidence, I respond to Paul in a 'professional' manner. I hide my congruent response to our shared experience; I feel confused about this and wonder about my reaction. Following this session, I sense that Paul and I perhaps missed out on something meaningful in our work together. Not able to stop thinking about this experience, it seems to follow me everywhere. It sticks with me and leaves a feeling in my stomach that I cannot quite understand. Having this experience feels like an opportunity; I am being told I am on the right track, as if my self-questioning is being affirmed and I am being given signs or clues saying, 'you're going the right way' (Durant, 2002) toward gaining insight into how I learn to be an effective counsellor.

Putting my counsellor self together is like tackling a jigsaw puzzle. Yet this is no ordinary puzzle. A puzzle is purchased based on the picture on the front of the box and the choice of difficulty level. I ultimately know what I am in for and what I will end up with – this is not the case here. Usually, by propping up the picture on the front of the box and periodically looking at it and guesstimating what pieces may fit where, I can try each piece. I on-the-other-hand, face strewn pieces of a picture I may not even like, without a clue as to the difficulty level. The box is already open and the pieces have shifted all around in transport from one country to the next. I do not even know if I can account for all the pieces. Dispersed pieces, some soft edges, blurred, out of focus bits, others with defining curves or sharp colours but none that obviously fit together. Their shapes can be traced with my eyes but I am not sure they fit until I try them and either I experience them as an ill fit or their placement feels right. Perhaps the pieces are even from different puzzle sets. I face a never-before-seen assortment of pieces that supposedly feature a picture of me as a counsellor but there is no example of what my creation should resemble when it is complete; there is no template to follow. My thoughts and feelings are being pulled in many different directions; I do not quite know how to process my experience. Therefore, I hope to let go of the need to know how and instead, let the thoughts and feelings come. Through a reflexive processing of my experience, I begin to place pieces of this jigsaw puzzle.

The beginning piece of my mom's artwork is a collage made of fragments of images she used as inspiration for her painting of a path. My developing self as counsellor, like a collage, seems to be made up of snippets of experiences, thoughts and feelings. This initial, inexplicable experience in counselling work feels like it holds all of the pieces I need to begin to answer my question of how I learn to develop my 'use of self' as a counsellor, that is, how I learn to bring myself more fully into relationship with clients. I feel insight lies in confronting my uncertainty. I attempt to hold these pieces as they are, not trying to piece them together but allowing them to come into being on their own in whichever way they may (*or perhaps may not*). My study is not an overview of my learning to put the pieces together and sharing my conclusions, but it is an exploration of the process of arranging the pieces; it is the learning process itself.





B: "Collage"

To this day, I wonder what a congruent response to Paul of revealing my feelings of surprise, meaningfulness and uncertainty of how to respond to our experience could have brought to the work. However, I can learn from my experience. As Ryklina (2012) proposes, my reaction to such experiences is worth investigating more deeply, as my internal experience may be a fundamental part of the therapeutic process. This is something that cannot be explicitly taught on a counselling course because it will be unique to me but I feel can be learned through being open to discovering my own truth by reflecting on the uncertainty of my experiences (Levine, 2002). Reflecting on my reaction to my ‘inexplicable’ experience makes me think about my life as a young girl on the brink of becoming independent and my internalised values of strength, which includes quelling vulnerability to be and feel in control. I wonder what role the values I associate with what makes a ‘successful’, ‘competent’ woman, namely being independent, strong and multitasking, play in experiences of uncertainty and in my developing ‘use of self’ as a congruent counsellor.

### **Vignette: A strong girl**

*As a young girl, I was very sensitive, anxious and withdrawn. I felt uneasy in social settings and struggled to communicate with others. I would be reprimanded for being rude if I did not make eye contact with someone who was speaking to me. Growing up, it was important that I learned to do things on my own. My mom would make me face any circumstances that challenged me and when I felt a sense of pride and accomplishment, I felt she awarded this to herself because she had pushed me to do it. I wanted to be like her so I could achieve things on my own which would warrant the acceptance I craved. It seemed my vulnerabilities were overridden and replaced by lessons of strength and independence.*

*My mom was forced out into the world on her own at age fourteen. Even though she did not complete primary school, she was able to pursue a trade, marry and start her own hairdressing business out of the family home whilst raising three children. She became a strong, intelligent, outgoing, multi-tasking, in control, busy, community-involved woman. She was super-mom. I greatly admired her*

*for all of these qualities. She became the epitome of independence and worked extremely hard to get there and stay. She was the mother that she did not have for my brothers and me. Values of strength, independence, control and self-sufficiency were etched into every fibre of my childhood along with unspoken, weighted messages that it was not acceptable for me to be introverted, seemingly dependent and anxious, qualities attributed to my dad; if I am independent, self-sufficient and strong like my mom, I will be accepted. I began to try my hardest to avoid showing my vulnerabilities because it was my strength that was rewarded (as if strength and vulnerability were opposing forces).*

*In early adolescence, in front of the eyes of others, I was a straight-A student and extracurricular go-getter. I busied myself with school involvement, received recognition for volunteer hours and top student in many of my classes, performed in musicals, played in concert band and sang in choirs. I was a peer counsellor, member of the photography club, and worked on the graduate committee as well as the high school yearbook. I began to find myself in roles that would not have represented my former self. To my surprise, I was commemorated with a peer-voted 'Most Inspirational' award and nominated for 'Grad of the Year'. The more successful I felt I was becoming, heeding my mom's lessons which were echoed through acceptance from my school community, the more I began to accept this new self despite persistent anxiety. I left the introverted, vulnerable girl behind. Not only was she not accepted by her mom, her peers bullied her. I came to feel that I was a self-sufficient, well-accomplished, independent young woman. Yet I struggled with friendships, only able to tolerate one at a time, and behind closed doors, suffered from depression and anxiety that I was convinced I could manage on my own. The two strongest residual messages I carried forth into adolescence were that the strong, independent, involved, multitasking me who is like my mom is accepted; any self other than her should remain hidden. Whilst my parents' marriage was deteriorating, we held up our image of the 'perfect' family to the outside world. I came to learn that it was important to only have my strengths seen by others at all times even if this was not a truthful portrayal of what was actually occurring. It felt like a matter of unspoken importance in my family to be perceived as 'perfect' and hide from others the truth of what we were actually like behind closed doors.*

*My mom was my primary caregiver and the closest person to me and this changed overnight. At the age of fifteen, I was faced with just how unpredictable and uncontrollable life inevitably is. Even the person I relied on most was unpredictable. This realisation came crashing down as I waited, in a complete lack of control, to hear whether my mom would survive. In amidst our family's chaos, my mom was out running early one morning when she was hit by a truck and left on the side of the road. She suffered severe head trauma resulting in brain injury. I have flitting images of monumental bruises, the streaking of yellow antiseptic, a tube draining a punctured lung, fluids, flesh, pins, plates and screws that no child should ever experience of their parent.*

*Following her lengthy hospital stay, whilst she was still casted and on crutches, she ended her marriage and even still managed to keep up outside appearances. My mom chose to be rid of someone I saw myself similar to and struggled to be different from. She displayed strength under these dire circumstances yet behind closed doors, she relied heavily on me to take care of her physically and emotionally. My image of her was shattered when she exposed her deep pit of despair that I did not have the capacity to hold. I felt betrayed...and scared. If I remained similar to my dad, would my mom not feel loved by me? Would she also leave me? With my mom in a position of being vulnerable and depending on me, I found it difficult to accept her. Is showing this weakness acceptable? I now saw the self that I wanted so badly not to be, and had convinced myself I was not, in her. I had come to unconsciously hide my vulnerable self whilst regularly displaying my presentational strong, independent self and intellectually capable self.*

*I went from a home environment that was run with such control, precision and consistency to things feeling chaotic, uncontrollable and never the same again. I had no clue how to be flexible when needed. My mom's brain injury actually made her incapable of thinking and organising in the same way I was used to. I felt I had to redevelop a relationship with her to accommodate the differences in her personality that affected how familiar and predictable she was to me prior to the accident. The pain of this experience made me long for the consistency of the life I had before. These events in my*

*adolescence I felt I had no control over such as my mom's accident and my parents' separation felt like a rolling ball of cataclysmic change that I could not halt. During this time, I felt as if everything I knew was being swept out from under my feet and I had nothing to hold onto to keep myself from also being swept away. Amidst all of the chaos and unpredictability, I could preserve familiarity and control in some ways if I remained in my head becoming even further distanced from feeling vulnerable. I have very little recall of what this time of my life was like apart from retreating further into my head, predicting of what may come to feel prepared and avoiding vulnerability when it threatened most, creating a foggy numbness. At least in my head I could convince myself I was in control and life was manageable and knowable. I convinced myself I felt less small and alone. I recoiled into a protective shell, telling myself that I did not need anyone else but me and I justified this as strength. I could get through this on my own. My 'strength' was commended.*

*My intellectually capable self that desires control and predictability and can struggle to let my vulnerable self be seen is the self that came to Scotland (massive unknown) to pursue counselling training.*

### **Reflections on uncertainty**

According to Rogers (1951) my inner-self contrasts with the image I present to the world and to protect this image, I act in a way that is not the real me. I have a tendency to withdraw to a place of thinking and explanation to appear knowing and feel I remain strong and in control (French, 2001; Winnicott, 1971), perhaps as a way to avoid the pain of the truth of uncertainty. I refer to this as remaining 'in my head'; it brings a sense of distancing and safety. I allow people to assume that I am composed, competent and articulate all the time, preferring this version of my self to the real one. At times I can feel I am hiding behind my words. There can be a gap that exists between what I say and how I feel; this is the definition of incongruence. I am aware of obsessively going over what I want to say in my head, to prepare it so when it comes out, it flows eloquently when sharing with others. I can relate to how Guggenbül-Craig (1971) writes of the 'false prophet' who feels the need to "be the hypocrite now and

again, to hide his own doubts... to mask a momentary inner emptiness with high flown words...[and to] present himself to the world (and to himself) as better than he really is” (as cited in Norcross, 2009).

Winnicott (1990) describes values of strength and independence as adding to a barrier from ‘being’, barricaded by the false self of wanting to ‘do’ or know. Levine (2002) writes of how the anxiety of uncertainty promotes a wanting to ‘do’ to avoid awareness of experiences of uncertainty. Levine’s (2002) use of the term ‘doing’ describes how I understand my use of thought and language. I use the term ‘thinking’ in reference to objective thought or what Bion refers to as ‘after thinking’ that acts as an obstruction to tolerating uncertainty or an avoidance of truth (Bion, 1962; Symington and Symington, 1996). However, as Levine (2002) points out, not knowing does not *always* result in anxiety that perpetuates reliance on intellect; rather, this result develops when not knowing has a specific emotional significance that is trying to be avoided. What am I trying to avoid? Before I may be able to relinquish my reliance on knowing and no longer require the sense of safety and avoidance I obtain from intellect, I feel it would be helpful to give voice to the fear that holds it in place. According to Levine (2002), this avoidance pattern just keeps continuing until reflected on. Perhaps changing my relationship to uncertainty begins with understanding what has influenced it thus far.

Levine (2002) says that psychically, our uncertainty may have several connected meanings linked to early object relations. When an infant or young child's state of being in relation to its primary object disrupts connection with that object, that state constitutes a danger to the infant or young child's physical and emotional survival, which depends on maintaining the connection with its object. The anxiety that one associates with uncertainty is anxiety that he or she will become an unacceptable self, and therefore those on whom he or she depends will reject him or her. The message I seem to tell myself is I am more likely to remain in relationship if I am emotionally distant, independent and strong (seemingly opposing, and incongruent ideas). Bohart (2007) and Ewen (2003) mention that the child in need of acceptance will avoid aspects of his or her self that are unrewarded even if this entails incongruence. As Norcross (2009) points out, we are wanting and reliant on relationship yet we fear the uncertainty and

unpredictability of the other and loss of the relationship. We dread being unlovable, unwanted and unaccepted. Levine (2002) shares how we must know this unconsciously. To avoid rejection, the unacceptable self must be somehow removed from the relationship and no one, including the person whose self it is, can know of it. What must not come into awareness are the aspects about ourselves that we fear disrupt connection. Therefore, not attempting to understand our selves is part of a strategy that prevents that self-state from disrupting the relationship. Awareness of my false-self relating may be unconsciously understood to be detrimental to my relationships. Self-awareness then prevents gratification and becomes threatening of survival.

Being my 'acceptable', knowing and strong self is believed to have kept me in relationship with my mother and anything that may have challenged this was avoided. As Brown writes (2012): "We're afraid that our truth is not enough, that what we have to offer isn't enough without the bells and whistles, without editing, and impressing" (p. 41). However, I realise now that as much as I may have been trying to unconsciously control for my mom's acceptance of me for my survival, I could not control whether my mom would survive.

It is my responsibility as a therapist to understand how my personal issues triggered by uncertainty that might cause me to respond in a way that quells my vulnerability and insecurity to keep me safe and secure may affect the therapeutic relationship. Betts (2007) relays in a quote from D.T. Suzuki, the renowned Zen master: "As soon as we reflect, deliberate, and conceptualize, the original unconsciousness is lost and a thought interferes. Man is a thinking reed, but his greatest works are done when he is not calculating and thinking" (para. 26). My learned defences may be limiting my 'greatest works' as a counsellor. Perhaps like in my personal story, being incongruent to feel I will be accepted is present even in my interactions with clients as a defence against being rejected. However, if I were to remain open to the idea of not knowing, there would be a space no longer filled with the safety of thinking and explanation but riddled with harrowing vulnerability and uncertainty (Levine, 2002).

**Conclusion**

I disclosed an inexplicable experience of uncertainty at the start of my therapeutic relationship with Paul that spurs my self-reflection and wondering about what influenced my reaction to this experience. I turned to my past and looked at my upbringing and experiences of uncertainty particularly in adolescence and my 'way of being' that seemed to keep me in relationship. I have begun to gain some understanding of how my personal issues with uncertainty, especially revealing my vulnerability, may determine my 'way of being' with clients when in uncertainty. I discovered that my 'knowing' stance derived from my 'thinking self' as opposed to my 'feeling self' (Sela-Smith, 2002) is one of relying on use of thought and language, operating from intellect as a way of protecting my vulnerable self. I have come to see the 'doing' of therapy as hiding behind cognitive knowledge and use of language and I now wonder what is necessary for 'being' a counsellor.

As depicted in the first painting layer, I have begun to colour the canvas with 'broad brush strokes' as a way of responding to the question rather than defining it (Cayne, 2005, p. 29). Stern (2003) offers, "It is perhaps from this place of tolerating the blurry edge of experience that the presence of the unknown emerges and is felt". Allowing myself to connect to my tacit feelings triggered by uncertainty and reflecting on them is how learning to be in the uncertainty of the therapeutic relationship arguably occurs.





**C: "Layer I"**

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CREATING SPACE**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I write of two experiences from client-work and compare and contrast how I experience myself in therapeutic work with adults and children. My reflections arise from the heuristic phases of *incubation* and *illumination*. I begin to develop an understanding of the difference between *trying* to have a mind-set of uncertainty in therapeutic practice versus the capacity to tolerate uncertainty as a 'way of being'. Like any state of receptivity, tolerating uncertainty cannot be tried for (Betts, 2007; Rosenberg, 2005); it is become. Reflection on an experience of uncertainty with a client in search of the answers to his experience brings deepened understanding of what it really means to *be* 'not knowing' in the therapeutic relationship. I reflect on becoming aware of my clients' anxiety surrounding uncertainty through coming into contact with my own. This allows me to begin to grasp the implications of my own relationship to uncertainty and how this may affect the clients' process. I start to move from a conceptual understanding of tolerating uncertainty to an embodied one when I begin therapeutic work with children and my 'way of being' in uncertainty is challenged. Another layer of personal understanding unfolds as I question my emotional presence in work with clients.

#### **Vignette: Client Uncertainty - Work with Ollie**

*Ollie is very eager to have the answers, to get advice or the opinion of someone he places in a position of being 'all-knowing' which is most often his mother, who readily takes the opportunity on board, before it becomes me. Early in our relationship, I experience Ollie to be openly sharing his experience of me as being an all-knowing 'guru' and incessantly requesting my opinion. Ollie consistently speaks to the advice he feels I am giving him and my expectations of him. Ollie seems to experience my revealing my uncertainty as my withholding the 'answers' from him. He begins to question the purpose of counselling. In what felt like a spontaneous moment, I suggest a switching of chairs exercise; I have never done this or thought about doing this in my therapeutic work before but it is possibly influenced*

*by many 'role play' exercises on my training course. When Ollie is in the role of counsellor attempting to give himself advice, he recognises he is speaking to himself as his mother would when she explains his own experience to him. He reaches a crucial turning point of beginning to realise just how much he is missing from his own understanding of himself. In his desire for certainty, he realises he is lacking his own voice.*

### **Reflections on uncertainty**

In order to be able to bear their own uncertainty, clients may put all of their hope for relief from uncertainty into the therapist (Carswell, 2007; Guggenbühl-Craig, 1971; Symington, 1996; Voller, 2010). Their own uncertainty is piled in a Jenga-like manner on top of and intertwining with the counsellors' own. This includes: uncertainty of themselves, relationships, careers, futures, symptoms, their own feelings and whether they are loveable and acceptable or worthy of relationship. Moreover, if they are new to counselling, they may face not knowing how to do counselling, how counselling works, if it will work, if they will be any 'good' at it, and are subjected to a strange face peering back at them, head slightly tilted to the left. Voller (2010) writes that if the counsellor and the client both have difficulty tolerating uncertainty, then therapists are simply paralleling their clients' positions.

I struggle with my sense of competence when Ollie projects expert qualities onto me as the all-knowing professional and with how alluring this role feels. I find myself really wanting to be an expert and resist admitting I do not have the answers he came to counselling seeking - answers he was paying for out of a limited income. However, competence as a therapist according to Casement (1985) "includes a capacity to tolerate feeling ignorant or incompetent, and a willingness to wait (and carry on waiting) until something genuinely relevant and meaningful begins to emerge" (p. 9). In Norcross' (2009) study, one interviewed analyst speaks to admitting his own uncertainty to a client saying: "I don't have the answers. Only you have the answers. What I have is, I know how to get...to help us get into a process of trying to find the answers" (p. 75). This is what I feel I convey to Ollie. However, when he questions my purpose, I suggest switching chairs. In this instance of helping us get into a

process of trying to find the answers, did I wait for something to emerge, or did I jump in and fill the space?

Reflecting on my own story of my work with Ollie, my thoughts and feelings regarding my ability to tolerate uncertainty begin to change. At first, I write of this interaction as an example of my tolerating uncertainty in therapeutic work before I begin to see it as an example of the opposite. Again if I really pay attention, the same tightness that I felt in my stomach following my experience with Paul is still present. I feel that I can offer more, that the counselling space is still obstructed somehow. I am spontaneous with Ollie but I do not *feel* spontaneous – my intellectual, ‘thinking self’ is spontaneous in this interaction, perhaps already with an idea in mind of what I decided Ollie needs to realise - it is a controlled rather than immediately inspired spontaneity that comes from within me.

One analyst from Norcross’ study (2009) describes how even her unrevealed feeling of ‘rightness’ affects her counselling work: “My own thoughts, feelings, and imaginings affect what goes on in the room between my client and me, whether it’s obvious or not, whether I say anything or not” (p. 66). A struggle to tolerate uncertainty might be exemplified by practitioners who are ‘striving’ to maintain a mind-set of receptivity. The client might detect the counsellor’s incongruence and lack of a natural ability to tolerate uncertainty. Perhaps a counsellor’s ability to tolerate uncertainty as a ‘way of being’ is what separates counsellors who are *being* counsellors from those who are *doing* counselling, or those who are genuinely receptive from those who have an ‘assumed stance’ (Ehrenberg, 1996) which might also account for the difference between those who are more effective than others.

I am aware how especially when I try to be patient and present with a client the forcefulness of my ‘knowing self’ is like a drawn arrow awaiting an opportune target. At times I can feel as though I am almost holding my breath whilst repeating a string of words in my head so I do not forget my thought in case I find a space to say it. I anticipate those moments of finding something that fits for the client and experiencing a sense of relief along with the client. However, as Symington and Symington write, “When something is realized, for example when the analyst recognizes, in the patient's material,

something previously unseen...[the] feeling of excitement is not conducive to finding the truth and in fact may prevent it from emerging” (1996, p. 41).

Am I avoiding the truth of my own uncertainty in my desire for relief as well as perhaps wanting to prove my competence as a counsellor? Even with my growing understanding of the importance of tolerating uncertainty in counselling practice, I keep up the façade. Perhaps this is because I have only reached an intellectual understanding of the concept of tolerating uncertainty. Maybe I am unconsciously *trying* to be without ‘memory and desire’ - it is not yet a part of who I am or intrinsic to my ‘way of life’ (Symington, 1996) or ‘way of being’ (Rogers, 1980). Where is my emotional presence that is necessary for congruence and a therapeutic ‘use of self’? In this counselling session with Ollie, I do not access my own feelings of what it is like to want the answers to be able to feel more certain in life and be in less pain. I am not connecting to my self in counselling work with my growing awareness of the vulnerable girl revealed in the previous chapter. Perhaps the uncertainty present in counselling work is triggering my vulnerability and insecurity and I am still defending myself to feel safe and secure (Ryklina, 2012). I can connect with what Wosket writes:

I believe there is a danger that counsellors who are not open to allowing their own personal difficulties and losses to inform their practice may close down a vital part of themselves when they are with clients...Adopting a professional façade to block these off, as if they don’t exist, can mean that a part of me acts as if it is dead or numb when I am counselling (1999, p. 154).

Coming across Ehrenberg’s (1996) writing on use of her vulnerable self in counselling practice, I am struck by what I read. Ehrenberg shares how one of her clients describes his prior analyst as very ‘clinical’ and treating him as a ‘patient’, always keeping him ‘outside’ of her as opposed to how he experiences Ehrenberg in session. He reports that even when Ehrenberg is silent he can feel her ‘relatedness’. Her client describes his previous analyst as wearing ‘psychic rubber gloves’, and he notes that in response he feels too isolated and alone to take an emotional risk. In contrast, he senses Ehrenberg’s openness and her not being afraid to be in contact with him. He can sense her willingness to receive his thoughts and feelings, and he describes this as allowing him to take risks with her he never would have dared in his prior treatment (Ehrenberg, 1996). As I shared in the introduction to my study,

is this what my 'felt sense' of wearing rubber gloves at the start of counselling training was trying to tell me about my holding back in some way? Am I wearing 'psychic rubber gloves'? Is this the barrier that being in my head, using thought and language as a way to possibly avoid vulnerability becomes and how the client might perceive it? Perhaps despite my growing understanding of the importance of tolerating uncertainty in therapeutic practice, I am still wearing rubber gloves in my work with Ollie.

Wosket (1999) expresses that how deeply she can allow herself to be touched by her clients, is one important measure of how effectively she is able to work with clients. She writes how her client will be helped to the extent that she can be fully available to him or her as her authentic and whole self. If she needs to "block, dodge, duck and dive" when faced with certain aspects of the client's story or occurrences in their relationship, she says she will be preventing the client from doing the therapeutic work that they need to do. "Despite what my early training might have led me to believe, this means that I might need to be *more*, rather than *less*, emotional with my clients" (Wosket, 1999, p. 117 original emphasis). Wosket expresses suspicion of lack of emotion in counsellors: "If I have to draw a curtain over, or erect a barricade between myself and my feelings, [...] I am likely to appear detached and impassive to my clients, because this is what I am being towards myself" (1999, p. 118). As Ehrenberg (1996) writes, when the counsellor is not emotionally present and available there is a level of connection that will never occur and a certain level of work that may never be possible. Am I possibly limiting Ollie's use of counselling if I cannot be open to accepting my own anxiety and vulnerability in relationship with him? How may this affect the possibilities for his healing change in counselling? The analysts interviewed in Norcross' study (2009) share their process of normalising experiences of uncertainty with clients. If analysts fail to welcome uncertainty in clinical work, patients will be rid of their potential realisation that they have the capacity to heal themselves (Norcross, 2009).

According to one of Wosket's (1999) respondents to her research questionnaire for her study on what constitutes 'unorthodox practice', unorthodox practice is "essentially about being human first and a counsellor second. When I lose sight of that basic philosophical underpinning I can easily lapse into

the ‘expert’ role, which stops clients finding their own way” (p. 159). Nanda (2006) discusses how counsellors have the capacity to be both greatly compassionate as well as the capacity to be dehumanising towards others, so how we are as therapists is a choice: “Our way of being with others can be one of the most crucial aspects in therapy” (p. 344). Ehrenberg (1996) reveals that the key to connection and therapeutic depth with clients is the willingness to reach to the other, to allow one’s self to touch and be touched without the protection of ‘psychic rubber gloves’. What Ehrenberg (1996) stresses is that if the counsellor works from false self, or is cut off from his or her self, the barrier is exacerbated; the rubber gloves thicken. I recall myself as I described previously, awkwardly positioned toward my first clients; I can hear myself debating showing the ‘real’ me that exists behind the barrier of knowing - and wondering, *“Would just being me be enough?”*

As a counsellor, it is my responsibility to acknowledge how my desire to know or appear knowing and quelling vulnerability may be affecting the counselling relationship. What happens when my client is trying to express vulnerability and I am meeting it with a ‘knowing’ presence or my ‘thinking self’ rather than meeting the ‘feeling self’ of my client with my own ‘feeling self’? Could I possibly be recreating a relationship dynamic that I had as a young girl with my own mother when like my clients, I was vulnerable and now I personify the all-knowing mother I had, when with my clients? If I am responding to my clients’ vulnerability from a position of ‘knowing’ (even if unspoken or offered as voluntary uncertainty), my clients and I may be reinforcing avoidance of uncertainty in each other (Casement, 2011; Norcross, 2009; Ryklina, 2012; Symington, 1996).

When I begin to pay attention to my own difficulty connecting to my vulnerable self, I start to notice how my challenges connecting to vulnerability seem to mirror my clients’ struggles. Jung says there is often a significant relationship between the client's problem and the counsellor's own struggles (Roehlke, 1988). For example, Ollie describes being swallowed by an emotional desert and feeling physical pain in his head and ears from ‘over-rationalisation’. He reveals feeling his head is cut-off from his body. I become aware that when a client is feeling ‘blocked’ in his or her process in therapy it could

have to do with where I am at in my own self-development that, inevitably, I am unconsciously bringing into the room. Betts (2007) acknowledges this phenomenon as an example of some of the unknown, inexplicable connecting factors between client and counsellor. Ehrenberg (1996) writes how the counsellor's emotional presence precludes the chance of ever finding and connecting with the client and of helping them realise when they are not affectively present, where this is an issue. Even though I am not providing Ollie's voice for him as he described his mother doing, I am still perhaps responding to him from the same 'knowing' position. A reparative experience for Ollie might be for his vulnerability triggered by uncertainty to be met with an emotional response, rather than a removed, controlled response.

In order to connect with how I am feeling, Levine (2002) encourages accessing 'a something more' and Gendlin (1981) suggests going to a place without words. As Cayne and Loewenthal (2007) write, in tolerating uncertainty, practitioners learn to embody what they speak of as a psychotherapist, "which communicates to the being of the unknown other beyond mere words" (p. 375). This is where my learning journey takes me. Beyond the requirements of my counselling training, I am drawn to pursue therapeutic work with primary school children; it feels necessary but the reason is unknown to me at the time. Transitioning from work with adults to work with children scared me. I had hardly spent any time with children since I was one. When I begin work with children, again I feel a contrast between 'being' and 'doing', challenging my idea of competence as a counsellor. Struggling to differentiate between child-led therapeutic work and child-minding, I question the therapeutic significance of the work. Working with children, I feel I am in uncertainty, shield-less. Again, like when starting counselling practice, I find myself in unfamiliar territory. Work with children seems to throw everything I feel I have learned about counselling work out the window, to relearn it in a new way.



### **Vignette: Experience of play therapy - Work with Corey**

*Adults gather in a circle in the middle of a room surrounded by children's treasures; every art supply imaginable it seemed, sandboxes, toys and puppets. My wide-eyed, 'I'm not sure about this' face forms in response to suggested creative tasks as part of my induction training. I struggle to make art. I struggle to make up fantasy stories on the spot and share their content with other adults I do not know. My mind goes blank – the words are not there. But on the second day, something shifts just a little. I let go of something – and a sense of openness takes its place. I feel less inhibited, less blocked. I am using art supplies with reckless, mess-making abandon, mixing toys, play-doh and paints. The colours bleed together and shapes are formed that will never be able to return to their rightful container. I share my creations in a high-pitched, childlike voice that has repossessed me. I intermittently and haphazardly burst into giddy exuberance. I can create stories on the spot, with elaborate characters of wild animals and little plastic people that each has a name, background story, unique voice and various relationships with the other characters. Something resonates with me this day but I am not quite sure what. I take this curiosity into my work with children.*

*When we began our work together, Corey could be aggressive with the materials in the room, speaking out loud to paint bottles, shoving them around in the cupboard and telling them where they should be. If I offered a response, I was met with silence and a condescending stare. If he blurted out a piece of a story, when I responded, more silence or “sssshhh”. He creates our earliest game that involves his stabbing many holes into the top of his painted keepsake box and commanding me to try and trace around the punctures very carefully with a marker without it slipping into any of the holes. But the rules always change so they are difficult to follow and the game is impossible to succeed at yet it is never clear exactly what I have not done correctly. Each time I fail at the game, I am put in a time-out in the corner of the room as punishment. Here, I sit silently reflecting on my feelings of confusion as to why I am being punished.*

*When Corey and I paint, it is mandatory that we paint the same object in a mirror image of the other as I carefully pay attention to what he paints. I feel compelled to produce a precise replica of each of his paint strokes. Our water cups are filled to the exact height as the other and our paint trays have the same amount and allocation of paint colours. We use the same materials in every detail and position them on the table in the same way. If anything is spilled, it is cleaned up before we can continue.*

*Over a number of weeks we play out repetitively a scenario involving a baby. An alien figure that at first he dislikes becomes a baby that I am to hold gently as its mother and protect from 'baddies'. In this repetitive play, the baby is taken from me and put in an ambulance to go to the hospital because it has been hurt. Over six weeks we play this same game; my baby is taken from me, he gets hurt and he is put in the back of an ambulance in control of baddies. Each time I work at Corey's direction to try to get the baby back. Just when I almost have him again, he is taken by another baddy. Every time the baby is taken from my hands, I am instructed to shout, "No, I want my baby back, give me my baby back!" Then one week this shifts when the baby returns to my hands and stays there. I sit in silence, cradling lovingly in my gently cupped hands a dark, gooey alien figure I desperately want to protect. Corey begins to play a different game in the room on his own. This moment feels extremely meaningful and important in our work together. I continue to sit quietly perched in position until the end of our session.*

### **Reflections on uncertainty**

Children ask what feels like a million personal questions, they do not understand the meaning of the word confidentiality, sometimes they cannot tell time yet or have any concept of how long their session is, they seek cuddles, sometimes do not respond to me at all and or they kill me repeatedly in one session (although parallels to adult work can easily be drawn!). Unlike work with adults, offering a reflection, making links between sessions and drawing attention to themes seems futile (*There goes my clever detective work*). A child is yet to come to a session like an adult might and express, "So, I have been thinking about our last session all week, it really left me feeling like..." How do I work therapeutically with children then? I can only just 'be' with them. Making up our working contract, after

I mention the time, duration of the session and we discuss safety, Corey includes, “be nice to one another” – an eloquently delivered statement acknowledging the importance of relationship.

Whereas I previously experienced adult clients seeking my knowledge and testing my competence, Corey makes it pretty clear that my role, my title, my skills, my training, my theoretical background and my knowledge do not mean anything. At the start of our relationship, it becomes quickly evident that my use of language, a tool I had become aware of using to ‘prove’ my knowing, is intolerable to Corey. I find myself in a place where I cannot rely on my use of cognition or my use of words, only my use of self.

I no longer desire to use thought or dialogue with Corey about what is taking place in the room. The language Corey and I use is the language of movement, imagination, creativity and play and this allows us to tune into vulnerability. I have no need to try to understand or predict what is to come or try to make links to previous sessions. I begin to be able to locate the work we are doing within myself – to derive therapeutic meaning from how I feel being with him in session as how he feels in his world. I am possibly unconsciously relating to his lack of control; his confusion and vulnerability in his own life is meeting and mixing with my own. In my letting go of a need to know, receptiveness takes its place.



Rosenberg (2005) draws awareness to 'being open' and 'being attuned to something more'. Many of the participants in her study describe a feeling of spaciousness, receptivity or awaiting something but not knowing what. Rosenberg's (2005) interviewees characterise this state as a lack of

self-consciousness and spaciousness, which is empty rather than full, in which attention is unfocused and there is a heightened sensitivity or attunement to the atmosphere. One participant states:

Sometimes I feel like I've got some sort of antenna that catch, metaphorically. It's like a radar picking up a signal or something, but the difference is you don't use your five bodily senses. [...] I'm not using my conscious brain. It is sort of having an openness to it (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 57).

Similarly, Wosket (1999) writes, when empty she feels more receptive and attentive, clear of outside interference and instead filled with associations, hunches, images and bodily sensations. This is how I have come to understand mindfulness that I can struggle with when my mind is full. This emptying of the mind is also articulated well in Rogers' concept of 'presence' that is described as being receptively open and sensitive to one's own in the moment experiencing (Greenberg & Geller, 2001; Rogers, 1961):

I find that when I am closest to *my inner, intuitive self*, when I am somehow in touch with the *unknown in me*, when I am perhaps in a slightly altered state of consciousness in the relationship, then whatever I do, I seem to be full of healing. Then simply my presence is releasing and helpful. *There is nothing I can do* to force this experience, but when I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me, then I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways which *I cannot justify rationally*, which *have nothing to do with my thought process*. But these strange behaviours turn out to be right, in some odd way (emphasis added, Rogers 1961, p. 137).

'Presence' seems to necessitate letting go of control and predictability and being open and receptive to what may eventuate. This openness, emptiness or presence becomes possible when I can tolerate uncertainty. I discover that reconnecting with creativity, playfulness and imagination has aided my learning to tolerate uncertainty and be more present.

In my work with children, perhaps I was looking to return to a childlike state in order to redevelop, repair and reconnect with a self that does not feel the need to rely on values of independence and strength displayed through thought and language to prove her worth. Possibly I was seeking work with children as a way to hit the 'restart' button, going back and regaining some of what I had lost along the way; vulnerability, creativity and play. I am reminded of how Symington (1996) writes of the importance of a therapist being guided by his or her feelings and the role of imagination being the producer of creative thought and feelings. As Symington (1996) shares, "just as muscles soon

degenerate if they are not used, so does the imagination. It is not only through use that the imagination is actualized; it also requires a certain mental culture. The central ingredient of this culture is mental space” (p. 44). Where neither the psychotherapist nor the patient has imagination, “the patient clings to a belief, to an ideology or to anecdotal principles, and the psychotherapist clings to theory. In other words, it is possible to have, in the consulting-room, two robots reacting to each other” (Symington, 1996, p. 38). Symington (1996) recognises that:

The work of the imagination requires great mental effort; usually it is much easier to rush off and clutch at a passing theory. But when we do this, we give up on that struggle to stay in emotional contact with our clients. The imagination will thrive if it is given unrestricted mental space and a conducive environment (p. 45).

I will discuss emotional contact with clients in more depth in the next chapter. As previously mentioned, Norcross (2009) acknowledges that “play is within the analysts' own minds and thinking, trying to make room for something else, room to be surprised, and, one could say, room for the other” (p. 68). Norcross (2009) also discusses the necessity of leaving space for the unknown and what is not yet understood and how this space is likened to the space for play. She draws on Winnicott’s theory of play:

Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible then the work by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play. It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self (Palmer-Daley, 2007 from Norcross, 2009, p. 74).

Glover (2009), Miller (2005), Norcross (2009), Mitchell (1993), and Panhofer (2011) write of how perhaps letting go of rigidity and developing ‘negative capability’ leaves room for creativity and play. Durant (2002) refers to Amabile (1983, p. 496) who sums up Bion’s admonition of balancing knowing and not knowing necessary for ‘negative capability’: “The creative individual needs to have the knowledge, skills and abilities that come with training and experience, but also benefits from the playful open-mindedness of a child”. Cayne (2005) acknowledges that creativity does not generally come when we think we know something. It arises out of allowing the anxiety and fears that can be associated with an uncertain space or a space between. As Glover (2009) writes, according to Bion, the creative,

adaptive individual is the one who has negative capability. In my experience, these two ways of being seem to reinforce each other. Pursuing therapeutic work that requires a creative, playful way of being has helped teach me to tolerate uncertainty and the more I could tolerate uncertainty, the more space there was for creativity and play. They both perhaps require an emotional capacity or vulnerability that accompanies openness. Perhaps this is the emotional awareness necessary to use the ‘tools of the trade’ in a way that echo the psychotherapist’s personal self (Symington, 1996).

Through this valuable learning involving letting go of a rigid position of knowing and letting a fluid process of creativity and play take its place, I have come to see how I may inhibit or encourage others’ development of playfulness and creativity, a way of being that is more true to the self, in the same way that I may inhibit or encourage emotional presence. Similarly, Symington shares that it is through imagination that the meaningful world as we know it is constructed (Symington, 1996, p. 38). Therefore, unless the imagination of the psychotherapist is in a healthy, functioning state, he or she cannot help the client construct the new meaningful world they may desperately need. Development of the imagination is crucial in the making of a psychotherapist Symington (1996) states. This sounds comparable to Winnicott’s assertion that “if the therapist cannot play, then he [sic] is not suitable for the work” (Casement, 1985, p. 36). Work with children taught me this.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, starting with a vignette of counselling work with Ollie, a client who desired the answers to his experience from others, including me, I picked apart the difference between having a conceptual understanding of tolerating uncertainty and striving to achieve this as a mind-set, and an emotional understanding of tolerating uncertainty when it becomes a ‘way of being’. I also noted what might block and facilitate the counselling process based on the counsellor’s approach to uncertainty.

When challenged by working in uncertainty with a child client where my use of knowledge or appearing knowledgeable no longer served me in avoiding experiences of uncertainty, I began to access an inner awareness. I feel I am starting to grasp what Norcross (2009) denotes when she says that if a

therapist is professing certain or disproportional knowledge, he or she risks loss of deeper sources of knowing and knowledge that comes with having a receptive mind-set. I feel this receptive mind-set may be necessary to carry out counselling work to its utmost potential. Perhaps this way of knowing is attributed to 'being' a counsellor capable of working in uncertainty:

During moments when I have felt at peace with my doubts and uncertainties, moments, perhaps, of faith, I have caught glimpses of a different kind of knowing that seems to involve a deeper, more intuitive way of experiencing myself and others (Brothers, 2008, p. 160 from Norcross, 2009).

I begin to feel that accessing the meaning that I hold in my body, in my intuitive, 'felt sense' allows release of a reliance on over-thinking, rationalisation and language use, experiencing what lies beyond my barrier to vulnerability. In my work with Corey, I experience feeling 'more like myself'. It is accessing my playful and creative self that I believe aids my capacity to not know, to let go and just be me. I begin to learn to let go of *how to do* counselling work and instead, *be and feel* my work with children. I become more present, involved, touched and moved. As I begin to embody the capacity to tolerate uncertainty as a 'way of being', this in turn leaves space for creativity, play and imagination. I experience a reciprocal relationship between openness and vulnerability associated with tolerating uncertainty and being playful and creative. Betts (2007) thinks it is 'an open approach' that can contribute to an atmosphere in the session that conveys to the client that they are acceptable and encourages the emergence of their emotional life into awareness. I am beginning to feel that my more open 'way of being' or 'use of self' with children is perhaps more therapeutic than I have ever been in my counselling work with adults.

In this chapter, I have shown how I gradually accessed more of my self, allowing different 'emotional shapes' (Symington, 1996, p. 17) to emerge into consciousness and be seen, which might be understood in terms of the next painting layer. As Symington (1996) writes, we cannot become aware of our feelings until they have some definable shape. I recognise my process of sharing my experiences in a quote from Norcross (2009):

Our existence in some profound way is unknowable. We have various symbols and tools we grab to be able to try to think with, to kind of create something that – to give shape, shape to our lives, shape to existence, shape to experience. But it's always against this background of so much more that's unknowable and that we don't know; and all we can try to do is *paint* something at a particular moment that brings into relief some plausible shape (anonymous, personal communication, italics added, p. 95).

In the next painting layer a figure of a body takes shape. This represents where I am now beginning to locate my learning as a counsellor, as embodied rather than cognitive. My tacit knowledge of how I can bring my self more fully into relationship with clients and the implications of this learning process on counselling is beginning to be made conscious. Perhaps this is why Bion (1978) encouraged counsellors to approach their counselling session process 'notes' in a creative way: "When you have seen a patient, instead of going and writing up the session, why not instead go and make a painting of the next session" (as cited in Symington, 1996, p. 49).





**D: "Layer II"**

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **MEETING IN UNCERTAINTY**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I explore my understanding of what it means to ‘meet’ a client in therapeutic work as possibly the most crucial aspect of therapeutic healing (Buber, 1970; Ehrenberg, 1996; Rogers, 1967; Schmid, 2002; Stern, 1998; Voller, 2010; Wosket, 1999). I discuss meeting in uncertainty without avoidance of vulnerability as key to making ‘emotional contact’ (Ehrenberg, 1996; Symington, 1996). Ehrenberg (1996) states it is the counsellor’s emotional availability and vulnerability that determines therapeutic depth. In my experience, the level of connection and healing possible that Brown (2012), Buber (1970), Charles (2003), Durant (2002), Geller and Greenberg (2002), and Rosenberg (2005) write of requires openness to the unknown that comes from tolerating uncertainty. In the heuristic phase of *explication*, my learning to let go of a reliance on knowing and connect to my self, that I really began to feel in work with children, is brought into my work with adults. I experience the importance of connection in relationship and how this hinges on letting go of knowing and developing the emotional capacity necessary for meeting clients in shared uncertainty.

#### **Vignette: An experience of an unexpected ending - Work with Ellen**

*When I begin working with Ellen, she stresses her need for long-term therapy, seemingly seeking reassurance that I will remain her counsellor until she feels her work is finished. Ellen came to counselling to address her anxiety of not being in control. She expresses fear of not knowing what her future may bring, fear of establishing a career, finding a partner and being able to have a family. Her story intertwines with my own uncertainties of life. At first I feel challenged to remain open when Ellen desires rationalisation of her experiences; I notice my pull toward joining in. Ellen visits some very painful experiences of being a young girl who felt punished when she was openly emotional. Now she has difficulty accessing her feelings. After a significant period of work in which she begins a career, and finds a committed, loving and accepting partner, we begin working toward a planned ending during*

*which she expresses her fear of loss of what she has gained – she worries if she loses the things she now sees as positive in her life, she will revert back to how she was before we began our work together.*

*As we near our ending, Ellen phones to inform the centre she will not make her next appointment, which is unusual for her. Returning the following week, she discloses the accidental, sudden death of her best friend and having left the country to attend the funeral. Her friend was the same age that we are, too young. She died in a situation that Ellen and I have probably both been in a hundred times before. Why her? Why not either of us? Her friend was someone she always turned to, that she relied on and who knew her better than anyone. Ellen expresses anger at her friend for leaving her and shame for feeling this way. This is a friend who was mentioned often over the course of our work, who Ellen described as being similar to me and that she wants to be more like. Our relationship also faces an end. This is an unexpected, sudden twist to our planned ending that I could never anticipate or prepare for. Without any conscious awareness at first, tears gently roll down my cheeks in unison with Ellen's own. My mom comes into my thoughts in this moment as I reconnect with a sense of betrayal and guilt I felt when the person I relied on most almost left me.*

### **Reflections on uncertainty**

In this instance with Ellen, I am more exposed than I have ever been with a client. Yet I feel present, peaceful and open rather than confused or panicked; I do not sense any obstruction. The terrifying uncertainty of life has made its way into our relationship and instead of closing myself off to it in an attempt to protect Ellen and myself and focus on our relationship's 'perfect' ending, we turn to face it together. A participant in Norcross' study captures my experience:

I always knew people died – intellectually known. Now I really know. And I really know for sure that I'm going to be dead one day...[Death] has become a reality to me now...a certainty... Here's another place where the words are difficult – inadequate (2009, p. 95).

Any striving for explanation could not touch this experience and would keep Ellen and me from experiencing the moment fully. It is the counsellor's ability to allow their selves to be affected by the client's emotional truth rather than reaching for an unavailable truth and dissociating from the emotional

experience which supports the client to do the same (Gardner, 2008). This requires being open to my own vulnerability in experiences of uncertainty as opposed to just being a witness to the client's. In Ellen and my shared tears, I felt our similar fears, anxieties and impending loss of each other energetically present in the room.

Whereas before, with my own therapist, tears streamed down my face out of fear and feeling overwhelmed by my own uncertainty, now they appeared from feeling connected in shared uncertainty, sadness and an implicit understanding. They came from a place of self-compassion, self-awareness and recognition of the journey that I have travelled thus far, rather than acting out of my own fears. It was only because of the personal work I had taken up in this study that I was able to respond to Ellen in such a congruent, immediate and emotionally connected way. I feel I had made space available for her within myself. I believe if I had not reached this place within myself, I may have been able to listen to Ellen and help her to talk about her feelings but we would not have shared something so alive and personal together; a mutual understanding, a meeting in shared uncertainty and a feeling of togetherness that I sensed made the uncertainty feel bearable.

Ehrenberg (1992) is saying something important when she shares her belief that being sensitive to whatever I feel, no matter how bizarre or irrational it may seem at the time, becomes the basis for the most profound kind of therapeutic work. Levitt, Butler and Hill (2006) write, according to Gendlin, counsellors should help the client to experience his or her problems in the immediate present. As Levitt (et al., 2006) and Simpson and French (2006) state, it is in the empty space of the present moment that something insightful and meaningful may come into the work that will be the catalyst for change. Wosket (1999) writes of *immediacy* as equated with genuineness, which involves the therapist as he or she really is. This is an important way that counsellors can make themselves available to clients. In essence it is about how to be transparent with the client to see further into him or her self through what the counsellor reveals of his or her self. A form of self-disclosure that is most closely related to immediacy might be called 'relational self-disclosure' which is revealing my immediate here-and-now

feelings to the patient (Yalom, 1980, p. 414 as cited in Wosket, 1999). This type of disclosure would arise from my felt responses within the relationship with my client. As Wosket (1999) adds, immediacy is about catching the client off-guard. If the client's established defences are thwarted, the therapist may have an opportunity for real engagement or emotional contact.

Symington (1996) writes of supporting Fairbairn's (1958) premonition that 'emotional contact' is what people most deeply yearn for and what fundamentally gives meaning to a person's life. This is how Brown (2012) writes of vulnerability, which I understand to be necessary for making emotional contact. Symington (1996) adds that such contact is only effectively made through a signal emitted from the true self of another, therefore, "the interpretations that proceed from the false self cannot touch the emotions of the patient" (p. 11). As Symington (1996) expresses, it is the therapist's task to help the client to bear their feelings, to be with the client. But if the therapist also has feelings that he or she cannot bear, the client's feelings will be unconsciously rejected. The reaching of one's own feelings is therapeutic for both patient and analyst:

The analyst's task is to reach his [sic] own feelings. These feelings are partly modelled by the patient who is in interaction with him. This happens through a communication system that occurs at the sensational level of experience. To reach his own feelings means pain and loneliness. If, however, he reaches his own feelings, it frees the patient and favours his emotional development. This inner task is a life's work for the analyst (Symington, 1996, p. 34).

This is perhaps why Bion asserts, "there ought to be two rather frightened people; the patient and the psycho-analyst" (1990, pp. 4-5).

The importance of a counsellor's ability to tolerate uncertainty, as a prerequisite for the client's toleration is acknowledged by Carswell (2007), as well as reflected in Norcross' study by an interviewee:

I have to know that I can tolerate the unknowing and if I can tolerate it... and not just barely tolerate it, but really be comfortable with it, really allow it to be in the room – that makes it much easier for the client to trust it. Not at first, sometimes they just have to trust my trusting it before they can trust their own (2009, p. 73).

Being able to engage with a client's uncertainty experientially means one is really able to meet the client where they are (Voller, 2011). Wosket (1999) describes what I also experience in moments of meeting with a client: "I somehow feel that my client knows the essence of me in a way that has little to do with my role as a counsellor" (p. 119).

From Ellen's tears (and my own) came a sense of strength (*which felt different from what I had previously understood as being strength*). Despite our unexpected ending being infused with vulnerability and tragedy, Ellen shared that she was feeling more ready than ever to conclude counselling. Even though her fear of loss remained, perhaps her fear of an inability to cope with loss dissipated. She perhaps experienced in this interaction that we are more alike than different and I hope that what she walked away with was greater self-compassion, increased self-awareness and a sense of accomplishment for how far she had travelled in our work together: "Whereas we first met as counsellor and client, now we part as two equally vulnerable human beings" (Wosket, 1999, p. 208). Within this vulnerability seems to be increased flexibility to respond to whatever may be next.

As previously discussed, clients may come to therapy initially in search of the certainty of consulting a professional, but they will ultimately be more enriched by developing ways of relating to uncertainty as a result of seeing and experiencing it in action through the therapy process (Voller, 2011). A counsellor's driving need to know to relieve the anxiety of facing the unknown may deprive clients of the chance to do their own thinking and understanding, preventing both the counsellor and client from learning something new by experiencing a fresh perspective on their work together that can arise from frustration, confusion and ambiguity (Norcross, 2009; Lapinski, 2007).

As scary as being exposed and vulnerable in relationship may be, the feeling of connection is worth it:

There is something about the intimacy of sharing joy, exhilaration, playful exploration, or sadness, pain, grief, or of confronting illness and impending death, and going through a deeply personal struggle with someone that is extremely touching to both. It results in an indelible bond – an invisible thread of knowing what it is to be known and touched, and that it is possible. The

key here is the willingness to reach to the other in that way, to allow oneself to touch and be touched without the protection of the kind of “psychic rubber gloves” described earlier (Ehrenberg, 1996, p. 284).

I may not have been able to experience this with Ellen if I had not, as Brown (2012) says, dared to show up and be seen.

I have a growing awareness of the importance of how I bring my self into the work of counselling: *There is not just a client, there is a client AND ME*. This reflects existential philosopher, Buber’s (1970) concept of the I-Thou relationship. According to Friedman (2003) and Nanda’s (2006) definition of an I-Thou relationship, the counsellor responds to clients openly with their whole being. It is described as the type of relating of one reciprocal being, fully with another in contrast to the I-It relationship, an objectifying, non-mutual relationship. I would equate the I-It relationship in counselling to a process of ‘doing’ counselling or knowing ‘about’ the concept of tolerating uncertainty in counselling rather than learning through a willingness to experience uncertainty and develop self-awareness. The counsellor self in the I-Thou relationship is the counsellor’s true self that can be characterised as Brown’s (2012) ‘kitchen-table’ self that she describes as too messy, too imperfect, and too unpredictable. This sounds like my ‘coffee-shop’ self, the self I contemplated bringing into the counselling room in discussion with my colleague whilst sat at the café; the self I describe as feeling ‘more like myself’. My study shows the progression of how I begin to bring her into my practice. According to Buber (1970) “all real living is meeting” (p. 11) and healing emerges from the meeting that occurs between two people as they become fully present to each other.

Whilst engrossed in the process of reflecting on my experience of client work with Ellen, comparing myself at this point in time to two years prior when I had begun writing about my coincidental meeting with Paul, I was preparing to move flat. I spent the last day of my tenancy frazzled (once again packing my life into boxes) trying to get everything moved and cleaned. Yet to find another place to live, I was staying with a friend. After work one day, I rushed across town to the flat to finish the last bit of cleaning, go over the inventory and hand in my keys. Following the meeting and hurriedly

walking back to my friend's place, I ran into Paul who I had not seen since our ending two years prior. In this meeting, I again felt very aware of my 'humanness' – but my relationship to it had changed. I did not feel that I needed to appear a certain way. This time, I felt warmed by our silent greeting as we passed each other on the pavement and giddy with excitement from the felt meaning of being offered an opportunity to further grasp how much I have developed and learned. Interestingly, meaningful experiences have accompanied me in this study, possibly as my willingness to be open and receptive grew. This reminds me of how Bolton (2010) describes epiphanies happening and how possibilities present themselves when he allows himself to stop thinking and stop carefully being himself.

As Schmid (2002) relays of Hycner (1993), when being present, space for the numinous and spiritual dimension can emerge. The spiritual dimension refers to the belief that people are not isolated, but rather part of a larger whole existence (Schmid, 2002). This is a gift from the unknown if it can be received. Durant (2002) writes of the experiences of multiple synchronistic events and the feeling of connection to others and the universe at a deep and meaningful level. Many practitioners acknowledge reaching peaceful states and interpret them to be an experience of an underlying spiritual reality of the oneness between self and world (Rosenberg, 2005). Jung believed that this sort of phenomenon was not just a coincidence, but evidence of a collective unconscious, that there is something that humans can access unknowingly that unites us all together - perhaps not a meeting of minds, but a meeting of hearts (Durant, 2002; Halberstam & Leventhal, 2008): "Those unique coincidences which we call synchronistic, make us aware, again and again, of the beauty, order and connectedness of the tales we are living" (Hopcke, 1997, pp. 13-14).

Durant (2002) writes that experiencing the power of connection and guidance can ease anxiety of uncertainty. This is acknowledged by Cayne and Loewenthal (2007) who state that recognition of aspects of experience that cannot be defined but that may be found in the ordinary everyday as well as the profound, "open up hope in the face of fear of death" (p. 374 from Cayne, 2005). Rosenberg (2005) shares counsellors' experiences with the 'unknown' that have led to deeply intimate and healing



connections with the clients involved. This is supported by Main (2007) who writes that the acausal connection of events can have a transforming impact on the client. This brings me full circle, back to where I started reflecting on my unexpected beginning with Paul when I wrote, *"To this day, I wonder what a congruent response to Paul of revealing my feelings of surprise, meaningfulness and uncertainty of how to respond to our experience could have brought to the work"*. Perhaps it would have brought a greater sense of connection and more therapeutic depth.



There are meaningful coincidences happening everyday and as Halberstam and Leventhal (2008, p. xiii) suggest, perhaps we only have to open our minds and hearts to become aware of them, or to evoke them in our own life experience. According to Rosenberg (2005), when we are ready to see what the unknown has to offer, we can begin by developing our awareness of its presence. Otherwise, we may be unconsciously blocking this from our awareness and possibly also blocking meaning from the counselling process. If I am protecting myself from vulnerability, maintaining my 'comfort zone' with reliance on 'knowing', I may be keeping myself out of my own reach as well as the reach of others. I may be keeping myself from 'where the magic happens'. With my defences rigidly in place I may be missing out on so much. I accept now more than ever that I cannot control for how relationships begin, end, or anything in between including what may emerge upon letting down the barrier to uncertainty. In my experience, the possibility of what may emerge greatly outweighs the risks. According to Symington and Symington (1996, p. 9), Bion states, "the struggle in an analysis is to prevent the finite smothering the infinite".

According to some participants' experiences, as reported in Ryklina's (2012) study, the feeling of being vulnerable is essential to be able to even experience 'anomalous phenomena'. Similarly, Rosenberg (2005) finds that inexplicable phenomena may occur when counsellors are in an open or meditative state but neglects to say how counsellors can learn to be open to the unknown and use experiences of uncertainty in practice. I believe that each counsellor travels his or her own path toward discovery of his or her capacity for 'openness' through learning to tolerate uncertainty and to connect to vulnerability. However, this only occurs if the counsellor is willing to travel this path that requires confronting his or her own uncertainty. A counsellor's effective response to inexplicable phenomena arises from this receptive place and can foster a sense of connection in shared uncertainty with the client.

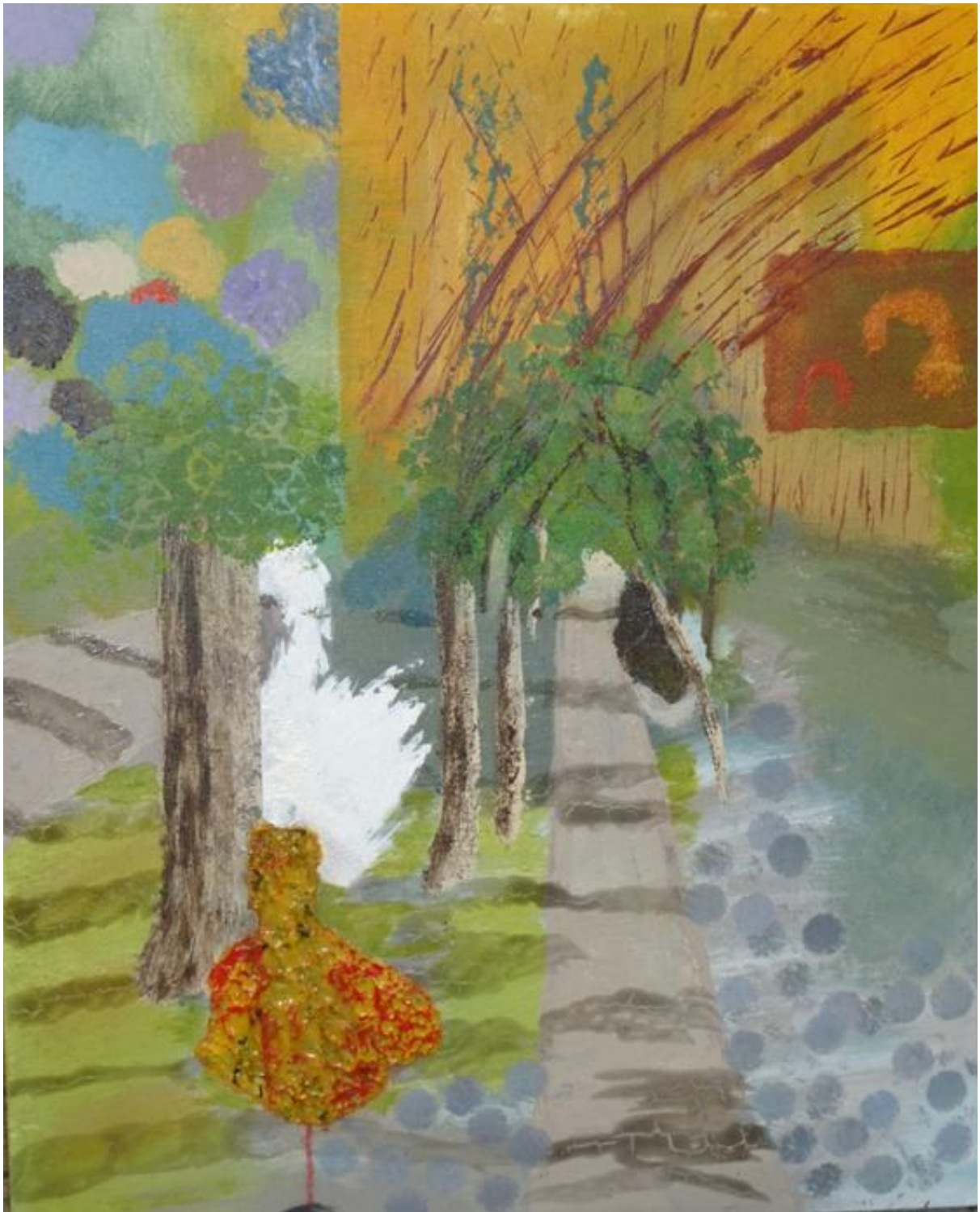
## **Conclusion**

Tolerating uncertainty, as I have discovered, allows for being present, open and empty and therefore accessible to clients and able to make 'emotional contact'. Through my experience with Ellen, I realise the relationship between tolerating uncertainty and being my true self or 'more myself' in therapeutic practice. I also develop a personal rather than conceptual understanding of the difference between *doing* counselling and *being* a counsellor. What I come to understand is that practising counselling from a position of knowing, "fills the mind's potential space with sensible phenomena" (Symington & Symington, 1996, p. 122) and "ultimately shortchanges both the analyst and the patient" (Norcross, 2009, p. 33).

Brown touches on the reciprocal nature of relationship that I have begun to identify as integral to the counsellor-client relationship involving openness and vulnerability (2012, pp. 53-54): "Until we can receive with an open heart, we are never really giving with an open heart". Rosenberg (2005) touches on something important when she emphasises that no matter how counsellors interpret inexplicable phenomena, in order to understand them and utilise them better, we need to create an environment with more openness to experiences that are felt to be profound and healing, emotional and spiritual that bring psychotherapists and counsellors into a deeper emotional connection with and understanding of their

clients. I learn from my experiences that with allowing vulnerability that is triggered in uncertainty comes creativity (Glover, 2009; Levine, 2002; Miller, 2005; Mitchell, 1993; Norcross, 2009; Panhofer, 2011) as well as space for emotional contact (Ehrenberg, 1996; Symington, 1996) and connection (Rosenberg, 2005; Brown, 2012). This is what I have come to incorporate into my developing counselling practice.

Whereas once, I felt unsure how I could move down the path before me, now I feel I hold the answer.



**E: "Layer III"**

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **EXPLICATION, SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

Before bringing this heuristic learning journey to a close, I reflect further in this chapter on growth, discoveries and insights that emerged from this study to form a *creative synthesis*. I have come to view vulnerability, my values, the counselling relationship and the unknown in a different light to where I began. I no longer value strength in independence and being in control and instead value connection through shared vulnerability in uncertainty. This encapsulates my development of therapeutic ‘use of self’ that facilitates client struggles with uncertainty more effectively. I realise that as a practitioner, I learn just as much from being in experiences of uncertainty with clients as clients may learn from being with a counsellor. I have demonstrated this learning through heuristic self-search inquiry.

#### **Explication and synthesis**

To be honest, when initially pursuing the practice of counselling as a career, I was under the impression that I could help clients become strong, independent and autonomous because this is what I knew; this is what I was good at and felt valued for. What I have come to see is that this is not what counselling is about. However, just as a ‘way of being’ can be passed down through family as I have illustrated, it can also be reinforced in relationship with a client. Casement (1985) and Norcross (2009) acknowledge how in an unconscious attempt to maintain similarity rather than tolerate the uncertainty of difference and otherness, the alterity of ‘the Other’ may be assimilated to what is ‘the same’ or the otherness is dismissed altogether as being of no importance. Perhaps this is why as Brown (2012) writes, people are more likely to value in others, the things they value about themselves. If I had not been open to doing self-awareness work and able to admit that I do not know how to do the work of counselling, and can never really know, I probably would practice in a way that promotes the values I came into my counselling programme with.

It left me in a state of shock when it actually sunk in that I was in training to be in relationship with others, to learn *interpersonal* counselling. Did I even really know what this was about? I pictured the younger, anxiety-ridden me that could not even look another person in the eyes - with a ghastly expression on her face. *How do I be this?* Doing this programme of interpersonal counselling has turned what I felt I knew on its head. I have gone from a place of feeling like I was pursuing something I would really excel at, something that was familiar to me, to feeling like I needed to question my very way of being in the world. I enquired into how my values of strength, independence and emotional distance that I unconsciously understood to be keeping me in relationship before, affected my capacity to be in relationship now. Experiences of counselling practice and personal counselling have taught me that a client's sense of autonomy only forms a small part of the change that he or she is able to make – another larger part has to do with building connections in relationship with themselves and others. This is something I have been in the process of learning for myself.

I can relate to Brown (2012) who expresses how she believed she could opt out of feeling vulnerable by controlling things. She feels she 'performed' until there was no energy left to feel. She made what was uncertain certain, no matter what the cost by staying busy so that the truth of her hurting and fear could never catch up. Brown (2012) writes of how she looked brave on the outside and felt scared on the inside. I connect to what she writes of learning that her protective shield was too heavy to carry around, and that the only thing it really did apart from be exhausting and distract from her vulnerabilities, is keep her from knowing herself and letting herself be known: "When we pretend that we can avoid vulnerability we engage in behaviours that are often inconsistent with whom we want to be" (Brown, 2012, p. 45). As Brown writes, "vulnerability is the source of authenticity" (p. 34).

I can see now why Brown (2012) aims to debunk the perception that vulnerability is weakness as the most widely accepted myth about vulnerability and the most dangerous. Brown writes, "Yes we are totally exposed when we are vulnerable. Yes, we are in the torture chamber that we call uncertainty. And, yes we're taking a huge emotional risk when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable" (pp. 32-33). Yet

“vulnerability is the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity” (Brown, 2012, p. 34). To truly experience this requires ‘daring greatly’. Brown explains: “There's no equation where taking risks, braving uncertainty, and opening ourselves up to emotional exposure equals weakness” (2012, pp. 32-33). According to Brown, to believe that vulnerability is a weakness is to believe that feeling is a weakness. Brown bluntly expresses that like uncertainty, the only choice regarding vulnerability is a question of engagement: “We can't opt out of the uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure that are woven through our daily experiences. Life is vulnerable” (2012, pp. 44-45). Therefore, the level to which I protect myself from being vulnerable is a measure of my fear and disconnection. To exclude my emotional life out of fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living: connection (Brown, 2012). It is my developing acceptance of my vulnerability that allows me to be in uncertainty with clients and meet them where they are. Madeleine L'Engle captures my learning journey: “When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability. To be alive is to be vulnerable (from Roberts, 2008, p. 99).

I agree with Wosket (1999) that it is critical for counsellors to rediscover and embrace their own painful stories, which is a catalyst for the ability to empathise with others who have painful stories of their own. Counsellors and psychotherapists are of greatest service to their clients when they allow themselves to be a ‘wounded healer’ (Norcross, 2009; Wheeler, 2007) or an ‘internal client’ (Wosket, 1999). Romanyshyn (2007 as cited in Norcross, 2009) identifies uncertainty as among the many ‘wounds’ or limitations that the counsellor must develop awareness of. As Norcross (2009) writes, a wounded healer recognises how his or her ‘wound’ may be shared with the client and I feel this recognition becomes evident in my study: “Such an analyst recognizes how the patient's difficulties constellate his [sic] own problems, and vice versa, and he therefore works openly not only on the patient but on himself. He remains forever a patient as well as a healer (Perry, 1997, p. 120 from Norcross, 2009). Through heuristic research, a wounded healer’s:

Silent, painful fears that unconsciously control the experience of life can be acknowledged, heard, felt, and released as they transform. Incomplete, incorrect, or misinterpreted information that inhibits life-experience can be completed, corrected, and reinterpreted, allowing life to move forward with fewer blocks (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 80).

Among the difficult feelings I accessed and allowed space for in the process of this study is how easily someone I love can be taken from me, and the uncertainty of my path and of how long I have on it. I came to realise just how much I can be held back by fear of what I may lose, and how this feeds my struggle to value every moment. In my fearfulness, I lose out on so much.

Confronting my own uncertainty as a way to develop my therapeutic ‘use of self’ has been a necessary part of my professional development. It may only be in my own working through of personal wounds that I can in turn, help clients with theirs. As a counsellor reflecting on my own experience, I agree that “as we thread our way through the patient’s brambles, we trip over the big feet of our own self-interest, then stumble to those same feet to resume the quest for the other” (McLaughlin, 1995 from Slavin & Kriegman, 1998, p. 247). It is perhaps only through a willingness to stumble that I have come to reach the other. It seems, as I show in my study, that it may be in my willingness to reach the other that the other can also reach me. Like Tootell (2010), I hope to create an atmosphere of safety and trust that allows clients to expose their vulnerabilities. I feel it is not appropriate to expect clients to expose their own vulnerabilities without going through a similar process myself.

As a result of being in the uncertainty of this heuristic process, I came to see both vulnerability and the counselling relationship in a different light. Following my unexpected beginning with Paul, I felt I had learned something quite profound but I was unsure what. I sensed a self-constructed barrier in the way. I have had a taste of what lives on the other side of the barrier by accessing another way of knowing that comes from within. I developed trust in the *felt* meaning of my experiences rather than relying on explanation. It is working from feeling and developing toward emotional contact with clients that I believe I transitioned from *doing* counselling to *being* a counsellor. I do not feel I could have reached this place in my counselling practice if I had not faced my own fears, challenged my reliance on



knowing, let go of my preconceived ideas of how a counsellor 'should' be and allowed me to be myself, a self that can be creative and playful, uncertain, vulnerable and only human. I now feel closer to 'O' (Bion, 1970), my 'True Self' (Winnicott, 1971) authentic self (Rogers, 1980) and feel 'more myself'. Reflecting on my client work, it seems my developing capacity for 'not knowing' and *being* 'more myself' has helped my clients to develop toward being more themselves and accepting of who they are. Perhaps my developing capacity to tolerate uncertainty and just 'be' gives my clients permission to do the same, a permission that I now understand as being what I needed as a child:

We are all meant to shine, as children do [...] it isn't just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others (Williamson, 1992, p. 190).

From a place of feeling in pieces, I began to rebuild, picking up each piece of my developing counsellor self, gently holding it, wondering about it and appreciating it as well as discovering new pieces and recycling old ones. However, "as soon as one problem has been solved, it becomes the starting point for a new one. The search never finishes – it goes on and on and we can never reach a point where we can sit back and say, 'now we have solved it'" (Symington, 1996, p. 48). Although I may never 'solve' the puzzle of learning to be an effective counsellor, my pieces are no longer scattered. They have come together to create a whole, a whole I can now more congruently offer to others. Some of the pieces of my puzzle I began with have been left hanging as loose ends, they may have frayed along the way, but they are part of where I have come to through a process of where I have been. Each strand of my experiences in some way affects me, even the ones I am not fully conscious of enough to write to but I hope they have been represented in images, metaphors and between the lines of my text.

As I understand it, knowledge is not fixed but is constantly evolving; it is "always coming into being in the specific occasion of understanding" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 195) which makes beginning to come to a conclusion difficult. I am resisting 'wrapping up' my learning too neatly. I cannot exit this study with a 'perfect ending' of having mastered tolerating uncertainty, not even close, but I can leave

this study with acceptance of the uncertainty I am in as a counsellor, researcher, daughter, partner, and friend.

Engaging in this research enabled me to clarify not only the importance of my self as a person to the therapy process, but also to further develop my professional identity as a practitioner with more understanding of where I stand in the dialogue between person-centred and psychodynamic orientations of therapeutic practice. As a trainee counsellor, I learned to develop my unique therapeutic ‘use of self’ as my orientation for therapeutic practice that incorporates aspects of other theoretical orientations that fit me, rather than apply an existing theoretical orientation to my practice.

My heuristic path shared in this study marks the completion of my counselling training. Yet Wosket (1999) clarifies this as being “a point of departure more than a point of arrival” (p. 31). Every end is also a beginning. The end of my heuristic journey brings me back to look afresh at all the previously expressed uncertainty that still awaits me (*Now what?*). The path I was initially presented with at the beginning of this study was overwhelmingly uncertain. There still lies a path before me – one where I am no closer to knowing what lay ahead – I can only see so far before the looming unknown awaits me. It is the same path that leads to an unknown future, but standing on it now feels different.

I engaged with art in my writing as a representation of rediscovering being creative, playful and imaginative, that in my experience, required letting go of knowing to make room for a child-like spontaneity. In my mom’s first attempt at painting, a creative and playful endeavour in her fifties, perhaps her need to be ‘knowing’, finding safety in control, a layer painted onto me, was also in transition, beginning to loosen. My mom’s and my processes, despite the distance between us (or because of the space between us), ran in parallel. We both seemed to be almost simultaneously accessing parts of ourselves we had grown to become removed from, passed on through generations. Perhaps now we are the two figures situated in the top right-hand corner of the painting, peering out and surveying how our relationship to the uncertain path before us is beginning to change.

As I have explored in my heuristic process, a lot depended on whether I was willing to be open and present as my authentic self in the counselling relationship, as opposed to inclined to work from a removed, controlled, predicting and 'knowing' place. The theoretical assumptions on which my heuristic self-search inquiry is based form the painting's frame in its final layer. Facing uncertainty as my vulnerable self is the path that I am now standing on, a way of being in uncertainty that allows me to begin to move forward:

In order to have anything, you have to give up something else. In order to move forward – the only way to move forward is to close another door. If you're going to take this path, then you can't go on that path. If you stand at the crossroads, uncertain about which path to take, you're not going anywhere...and so I think it's both the ability to move into uncertainty and the ability to tolerate loss and limit and mourning what you have to leave behind. I think those two are all part of what makes it all possible to live a creative life, to live an open life (Norcross, 2009, p. 87).

Perhaps now I can let go of my training, let go of this study, take my learning and newfound feet to begin moving down this unknown path - this career path, this life path. There will forever be unknowns ahead. If the path that lay before me is inherently unknown, I will not know it until I *become* it.

*Thou canst not travel on the Path before thou hast become that Path itself* – H.P. Blavatsky (1889).



**F: "The Framed Path"**

**Contribution to counselling and psychotherapy research**

As I have addressed, current literature in psychotherapy and counselling, such as Lambert and Barley (2001) and Wosket (1999), clearly advocates the importance of practitioners developing their therapeutic ‘use of self’ because personal characteristics of practitioners are found to be the most reliable predictor of positive therapeutic outcome. However, there is a lack of research on how a counsellor could develop his or her therapeutic ‘use of self’. In this study, I argued that learning to tolerate uncertainty is a precondition to a practitioner’s development of therapeutic ‘use of self’. The importance of the capacity to tolerate uncertainty is written about extensively, pioneered by Bion. More recently, uncertainty is included in studies by Rosenberg (2005), Norcross (2009) and Ryklina (2012) who discovered that a counsellor’s response to uncertainty either obstructs or facilitates meaning in the counselling process. Facilitation reportedly hinged on the practitioner’s ability to be emotionally present. Ehrenberg (1996) attributes emotional availability, which is also a key attribute of a practitioner’s therapeutic ‘use of self’, to therapeutic depth. However, I found that how a counsellor learns to tolerate uncertainty is also largely missing from existing literature. Therefore, this study contributes to dialogue on how to improve the quality of the therapeutic alliance and influence therapeutic outcome as well as responds to the research-practice gap in psychotherapy and counselling literature.

How a counsellor learns to tolerate uncertainty and develop his or her ‘use of self’ is best represented through subjective research. As Ryklina (2012) discovered, practitioners need to confront their own personal issues triggered by experiences of uncertainty as an important part of professional development. However, subjective research in psychotherapy and counselling is also lacking due to the split that exists within the research community on views of what a valid research method consists of that has created a research-practice gap (McLeod, 2001, 2003). As a result, there are few published examples of heuristic research into psychotherapy topics (McLeod, 2011).

Wosket (1999) exposes the myth that large sample research studies are more valid. This myth deters many practitioners from attempting to research and evaluate their own work that is more likely to include the 'vicissitudes of real life', maintaining the context from which it derives its meaning, the counselling setting, as well as what lies outside the counselling relationship. Subjective research upholds its relevance to counselling practice. Therefore, as a practitioner-researcher, instead of omitting my own experience from my research, I took the 'road less travelled' in counselling and psychotherapy research. I approached my study as a heuristic self-search inquiry, a self-study that offered my own learning as an example of a response to the question: *How in my process of becoming a counsellor can I learn to bring my self more fully into relationship with clients and what are the implications of this learning on counselling work?*

I responded to the research question by relating the idea of the capacity to tolerate uncertainty or what Bion calls 'negative capability' to my own experience, which is how Bion intended for it to be engaged with. The capacity to tolerate uncertainty cannot be solely learned conceptually or even tried for; it is a 'way of being' that is become. Levine (2002) wrote of thinking about experiences, including their uncertainty, as necessary for learning to take place. This epistemological position undergirds how my learning to tolerate uncertainty arose from a willingness to confront my own uncertainty and related existential concerns. I initially used the space of this thesis to wonder about my response to a client in an inexplicable experience that drew my awareness to my way of being in uncertainty and how this affected my capacity to be in relationship with clients. I continued to reflect on myself in further experiences of uncertainty from my life and counselling practice.

I demonstrated how a practitioner-researcher could learn to tolerate uncertainty and develop 'use of self' through letting go of knowing and swimming into the unknown current. Leaping into uncertainty, through use of heuristic self-search inquiry, leaves room for emergence of discovery that can lead to personal growth and self-transformation. I showed how heuristic self-search inquiry facilitates learning from experiences of uncertainty, development of the '*I-who-feels*' and therefore

facilitative of a counsellor's therapeutic 'use of self'. This study allowed me to move closer to being fully and truly 'more myself', my imperfect, human self that is more authentic and congruent. I showed how this learning as a practitioner affected my therapeutic work, in particular the level of connection and therapeutic depth reached with clients.

This study presented a way to explicitly address whatever may be affecting a practitioner's emotional availability with clients that Ehrenberg (1996) stressed as important. I also responded to Wosket's (1999) invitation for therapists to look at their personal histories and begin to make explicit connections between personal characteristics and their potential for therapeutic 'use of self'. Through use of heuristic self-search inquiry, I explored my own healing, growth and personal development that I have gained from counselling work. I showed through my stories how my client work challenged and changed me on a personal level and how my professional practice evolved through experiences of being in uncertainty. This too is an area recognised as missing from current counselling and psychotherapy research literature (Cayne, 2005; Tootell, 2010; Wosket, 1999).

### **Strengths of heuristic self-search inquiry**

One of the greatest strengths of heuristic self-search inquiry is its practical relevance to counselling and psychotherapy. It is useful in explicating tacit knowledge and highlighting the importance of counsellor self-awareness. It necessitates letting go of conventional frameworks, tolerating uncertainty and being open to what may arise and therefore, developing therapeutic presence over knowledge of theory and technique.

I found heuristic self-search healing on a personal level. It required accessing the '*I-who-feels*'; I understand this as my vulnerable self that is necessary in development of my therapeutic 'use of self'. I was drawn to this methodology because it presented an opportunity to learn to balance my 'vulnerable self' and 'intellectual self' whilst writing about and with an awareness of my tendency to hide behind the latter. In my experience, my ability to access my '*I-who-feels*' gradually arose as I worked through personal issues with uncertainty by reflecting on experiences of uncertainty. By exploring felt-sense and

tacit knowing (Etherington, 2004), I was able to move beyond cognitive processes and into connecting with my own body, mind and spirit that I realised was necessary to be able to fully connect with an other. The words are taken right out of my mouth by Sela-Smith (2011):

The deeper lesson was to take the understandings from my head about connection and experience them in my body, but I had to reconnect to my body before I could do that and then to experience the interconnection, not as a thought but as a feeling (p. 227).

Through this heuristic self-search inquiry and accessing the '*I-who-feels*', I was able to bring my feeling self more into my research. Simultaneously, I was also able to bring this self more fully into the counselling relationship.

Another key strength of heuristic inquiry is that it complements the practice of counselling as a mutual, two-way process (McLeod, 2001). It therefore does not perpetuate an "us and them" divide between counsellor and client that can objectify the counsellor as 'expert'. According to Bond (2002), Etherington (2007) and Lees (2001) this is because this approach to research includes subjective awareness and reflexivity, which reinforces counsellor reflexivity. Etherington (2004) shares thoughts from Wosket (1999) and Rennie (1998) to show how reflexivity in counselling practice involves operating on two levels:

We need to be able to reflect on our selves, which in turn requires an awareness of our selves as active agents in our own process (Wosket, 1999). We also need to know what we feel, think, imagine and what is happening in our heart, mind and body; we need to know the inner story that we tell ourselves as we listen to our clients' stories (Rennie, 1998). So we move in and out of several levels of awareness as we listen to a client and to ourselves. This helps us to understand the decisions we make about what we might say next, what we pick up on, what we ignore, and how our own life experiences and contexts might be impacting on our listening and responding (Etherington, 2004, pp. 29-30).

What I intend to communicate is, "What matters is not the counsellor's maintenance of some highly idealized state of being, but his or her willingness to be disturbed within limits, and to struggle to understand this, to recover a balance, and to arrive at a new understanding or set of realizations about what has been going on" (Taylor, 2010, p. 405). This understanding arises from being open to and



receptive of one's own relationship to uncertainty. Therefore, a key strength of heuristic self-search inquiry is the level of courage and honesty of the researcher.

A criticism of heuristic self-search inquiry involves the criterion by which the utility or quality of a research study is often judged such as the scope for generalisation. I acknowledge and accept that my reliance on self-knowledge and self-report narratives in my subjective study that uses my self as my only participant has no rightful purchase on generalisability (Polkinghorne, 2005). Perhaps heuristic self-search inquiry is more authentic than traditional research approaches, precisely because of my 'use of self' as my only participant. My voice is more true than that of a researcher accounting for the voices of others: "Autobiographies . . . and life stories are likely to present fuller pictures [thick description], ones in which the meanings of events and relationships are more likely to be told than inferred" (Wall, 2006, p. 155). Another related aspect of criticism of this study is that the data generated is based on my recollection as a therapist, drawing from memory assisted by detailed process notes completed after client sessions. I wrote this study with awareness that memory is deemed fallible. Even though memory allows me to access a wealth of data to which no one else has access, naturally memory also selects, shapes and can embellish pleasant moments and omit unpleasant past experiences. Memory weakens over time and details are lost. It also cannot be validated by the observation of others. Furthermore, it is always impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represent how those events were lived and felt (Ellis et al, 2011).

The intention of my qualitative research study is not to be analysed and categorised or represented in measurements, ratings or scores (Moustakas, 1990) as in traditional scientific research. I did not intend to produce a 'how-to-manual' (Douglass and Moustakas, 1985; Tootell, 2010). I valued how a heuristic process is presented as an individual process that will unfold in its own way if control is let go of and uncertainty embraced. Therefore, I did not choose an analytical method of deconstructing stories into coded piles because this would undermine the essence of my research by directing attention away from thinking narratively about experience, taking the data outside of the context in which it occurred

(Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Such an analysis, especially one with categories decided beforehand, might not have allowed meaning to emerge (Bold, 2012). I approached my study, “not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 224). Those who criticise the rigor of personal narrative are possibly missing the point (Wall, 2006). “The point,” Wall (2006) says, “is not to engage [narrative] systematically but to engage it personally” (p. 156). A personal narrative is not intended as an exact record of what happened (Bold, 2012). It is intended as a representation aimed at capturing emotions (Tootell, 2010). Therefore, generalisability was not of concern as a limitation to this particular study because of the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which it was based.

Validity in subjective research is derived from what is learned within the experience and meaning discovered (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002). Heuristic validity therefore hinges on this question from Moustakas (1990, p. 32):

Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one’s own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching ... present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience?

Validity of heuristic self-search inquiry is therefore established by:

Surrendering to the process that is pushing itself into the consciousness of the researcher, allowing the process to unfold and then noticing results in expansion of self-awareness, deepening of self-understanding and of self-transformation that others can experience in the “story” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 79).

As Sela-Smith (2002) writes:

When others experience the story, whether it is in the form of a dissertation, a painting, a book, a piece of music, a dance, a lecture, or anything else creative, there will be something that resonates deep agreement within the observer. There will be mutuality between the creator and the creative synthesis; there will be a sense of connection and transformation that cannot be falsified (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 69).

According to Moustakas (1990), as the primary researcher and the only person in the investigation who underwent the heuristic inquiry from the beginning, I am the only one that can make this judgment.

However, I believe readers will provide further validation by comparing their lives to mine, by thinking about how our lives are similar and different and the reasons why (Ellis et al, 2011). My story therefore presents possibilities for other practitioners to hold in mind. My wish is for this study to stimulate thought, personal awareness and reflection for readers who may interpret my story in a very relatable and thought-provoking way that fits for them and arrive at a uniquely personal meaning (Esterberg, 2002; McIlveen, 2008).

The ultimate product of a heuristic process (the creative synthesis) is not an exact representation but a story of a personal transformation that has the potential to transform others (McLeod, 2011): “When a story is formed with the embedded wholes of the transformation in it, the story itself contains the power to transform anyone who dares to surrender to the listening” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 82). I agree with Sela-Smith who contends, “heuristic inquiry that results in self-transformation and the creation of a story that generates potential for transformation in others and in society is the strength of the self-inquiry method” (2002, p. 82).

### **Challenges of my heuristic self-search inquiry**

A challenge posed by this heuristic study was the ambiguity of the process, which stemmed from the exploratory, open-ended nature of this type of inquiry. I had to trust that this study would eventually evolve into a coherent and cohesive piece of work, even if I could not foresee it exactly and felt considerable anxiety about not knowing the outcome. Rather than be a seeker of truth, I have sought new understandings and instead of conducting research to confirm what I thought I knew, I conducted research to find out what I did not know and in doing so reached new learning. I did not know at the start of my research what I would discover through my explorative inquiry. I wanted to be open enough to discover what was out there and within me by undertaking research that required me to create space in my life, let go of structure and embark on a journey into the unknown. My capacity for this research has very much been a part of my research, a personal challenge. It terrified me to be without structure, to supposedly be able to let go of time frames and not hold an end result in mind, with no way to know

that I was doing my research ‘correctly’. As someone who likes to control everything, the only way I could do the research that seemed to have chosen me, was to accept that I did not know the final product or the steps to take. I divulge that at times I felt unable to continue writing; the chaos and uncertainty or the not knowing of what was to come of this writing process felt overwhelming.

I had to trust I was getting somewhere even when it did not feel like it, no matter how lost and out of control I felt at times. In other words, it felt important not to apply force to have the pieces of this puzzle fit together but to wait patiently for them to find their place, which required tolerating not knowing. I had to, as Etherington (2004) writes, wait patiently for ‘illumination’ when things would begin to make sense. The way in which the researcher allows illumination to occur is not clearly specified by Moustakas but appears to result from genuine openness to unique possibilities (Ellis et al, 2011). I found two quotes from Bolton (2010) helpful when my faith was challenged:

“Push back constraints of how it ought to be and accept how it is”

and

“See how it can be done if you just let go” (p. xviii).

However this ‘letting go’ presented a further challenge. The reality of heuristic research undertaken as an academic requirement is that there is a time limit involved but heuristic methodology requires not being confined by time. Immersion calls for the whole self to be engaged in the focus of the research by surrendering to it in such a way that the research unfolds, rather than an observing self or ‘thinking self’ attempting to control and direct the process to ensure that it moves in the right direction. Sela-Smith (2002) validates my experience when she shares that immersion can be challenged by dissertation requirements for graduation instead of growing out of the very being of the researcher. This was a tension surrounding the length of time required by heuristic research that was present throughout my study. I had what felt like a constant voice of anxiety about university deadlines, visa extensions, study extensions, student loan documents, and financial worries about the cost of being

a heuristic self-search researcher. I question a university requirement as being conducive to this necessary aspect of professional development but I have no doubts surrounding the importance of this personal process of discovery.

Another challenge concerned this study's aim to explore how the practitioner of counselling is personally involved in the therapy process. I used my self to demonstrate, through heuristic self-search, how the counsellor's 'use of self' is the most valuable therapeutic tool. Yet, what did I mean by 'self'? The question of whom or what the 'self' is has been perhaps the most talked about question in philosophy, religion, poetry, psychology and sociology and continues to intrigue authors of psychotherapeutic literature today (Wosket, 1999). Critical review of my perspective on self is required because as Erwin (1997, p. 47 from Wosket, 1999) criticises, much of what is currently being written about the self is not always clear "whether the author is really postulating an inner self, or is merely speaking metaphorically, or perhaps just writing carelessly". To maintain consistency between my theoretical assumptions and methodological decisions in this study, I am faced with the challenge of clarifying my position on the concept of 'self'.

The only way I could conceptualise 'self' (even when it was my own 'self' I was attempting to conceptualise), was from a particular perspective that was inevitably a construction according to my own context that involved a process of selection of information that was then conveyed through a choice of use of language. Consequently, there are a number of coexisting perspectives on the 'self' (Stevens, 1996). Paradoxically, in order to approach my study on learning to tolerate uncertainty as a heuristic self-search that required immersing in uncertainty or an epistemology of not-knowing, I had to rely with a degree of certainty on an assumption of what constitutes the 'self'. Admittedly, my chosen perspective may have provided some safety to explore uncertainty without feeling completely adrift. The epistemological position taken up in this study, that involves reflecting on experiences for learning and therefore growth of the self to occur, is based on assumptions of 'self' as it relates to the

experiential perspective of what it means to be a person that heuristic self-search inquiry is particularly adept at exploring.

To summarise, in this study I differentiated between an aware, intentional ‘use of self’ (Tootell, 2010) that shares similarities with an “assumed stance” (Ehrenberg, 1996) as well as “voluntary uncertainty” (Norcross, 2009), which I likened to a defensive ‘doing’ of counselling, a way of using cognitive knowledge to avoid the vulnerability and uncertainty of ‘being’. I referred to this part of my self as my ‘thinking self’ or ‘intellectual self’ that felt like ‘being in my head’ or splitting off from or avoiding accessing my feelings (which I associate with being in my body such as my heart or stomach). This differs from a ‘use of self’ that entails immediacy or transparency of the therapist as vulnerable, genuinely receptive (Ehrenberg, 1996) and open to “involuntary unknowing” (Norcross, 2009). I referred to this part of my self as my ‘vulnerable’ or ‘emotional’ self. As I demonstrated, when the capacity to tolerate frustration rather than evade it changes the meaning of ‘thinking’ from a defensive act to a willingness to reflect honestly on our experiences, then ‘being’ and ‘doing’ are no longer in conflict and ‘use of self’ can precede use of theory which then plays a supportive role to experience to further discover meaning. This is a progression toward a more authentic ‘use of self’, an integration and balance of my intellectual self and vulnerable self or a bridging of ‘head and heart’ and use of my whole being. This self-development is important for a counsellor to be capable of making ‘emotional contact’ with clients, meeting them person-to-person or being in an ‘I-thou’ relationship as opposed to an ‘I-it’ relationship (Buber, 1970). I see this development of ‘self’ as occurring through the phases of heuristic self-search.

I understand learning to be a process of discovery rather than a product. All heuristic discoveries are based on the power of revelation in tacit knowing through a process of internal search. Heuristic methodology is therefore guided by critical concepts proposed by Douglass and Moustakas (1985): *self-dialogue*, *tacit knowing*, *intuition*, *indwelling*, *focusing* and an *internal frame of reference*. Heuristic self-search inquiry thus recognises the interiority of experience or an inner

self, the '*I-who-feels*'. It lifts into awareness the experiences that are felt and with this a greater understanding and personal growth occur that produce self-transformation. Heuristic inquiry is understood to be an adaptation of phenomenological inquiry because it explicitly acknowledges the transformative effect of the inquiry on the researcher's own experience as researcher. In this study, I have shown my developmental progression of 'self', which includes my "therapeutic self" and "researcher self", through letting go of 'knowing' in a conventional sense, immersing in uncertainty, surrendering to subjective experience and connecting to vulnerability. Therefore, this study is based on two main assumptions of 'self' that assert a position on what it means to be a person. Firstly, a unitary and consistent inner self exists that can be accessed. Secondly, our experience is remoulding us every moment and our response is a result of all of our experiences that preceded the present moment. Therefore, the 'self' is understood to be fluid and changing and people are always in the process of 'becoming'.

Stevens (1996) outlines five broad yet fundamental aspects regarding what it means to be a person that constitute issues to be discussed rather than aspects a person 'possesses': a) *embodiment* or being related to a particular body; b) *subjective experience* including consciousness, sense of self and agency, and cognition or ways of making sense of experience; c) a sense that some of our experience and reactions derive from *unconscious feelings* that we may be hardly aware of; d) the influence of *social medium* of meanings and customs; and finally e) how these aspects are in complex *interaction* with each other. Varying perspectives on these five areas of what it means to be a person represent differing theoretical assumptions on 'self' and therefore, lead to different approaches to research. Even the perspectives that assert that meanings are the essential subject-matter of social science research, emphasise different aspects of what it means to be a person. Differences in assumptions lead to different methodological choices in pursuit of a different research purpose. This study presents an experiential perspective drawing on three related perspectives: phenomenological, existential, and humanistic. This perspective is based on a model of the person which emphasises the centrality of subjective experience

and that the person is an intentional agent who has the capacity to reflect on and to be aware of his or her own experience and situations (Stevens, 1996).

Consciousness means we have a sense of self or identity and are aware of our individuality, of being a unique person. This includes experiencing the world through one's own particular frame of consciousness, an external world as well as a world within of inner thoughts, feelings and reflections. Also, consciousness is characterised by continual change, it has a sense of flow and continuity. For example, memory provides some sense of continuity to our experience. An experiential perspective forms a particular position on consciousness as based on the assumption that being a person involves *subjective experience*, which is characterised by continuity or permanence, meaning something within the person remains consistent throughout the self's continual change. Furthermore, we experience ourselves as a mind within a body; our bodies seem to be an essential part of who we are and this is a fundamental property of a self-aware human being. Meanings that constitute a person's experience of the world emerge from the relationship between the experiencer and the objects and people in his or her world, meaning the world of experience is not understood as being confined 'within the head'. Another dominant aspect of the experiential perspective is that our lives are goal-directed and these goals are either reflected upon or pre-reflective and not yet conscious (but accessible to consciousness). This perspective also acknowledges that our capacity for agency is not entirely free but 'situated' within a social medium decided for us (Stevens, 1996).

An experiential perspective recognises that one of the extraordinary properties of consciousness is a capacity for reflexive awareness – to be conscious of being conscious or aware of our thoughts, feelings and our selves. We have a sense of being able to choose our thoughts and actions, but with our capacity to imagine possibilities of how things could be and with awareness of our agency (that we can initiate action), we have to confront the issue of choice. This means confronting our own responsibility for determining our future experiences and therefore who we become (Stevens, 1996). The experiential perspective that assumes our capacity for self-agency determines how a practitioner views his or her



work with clients. This position holds that counsellors and clients have the capacity to change their own situations and themselves and this study demonstrates how a counsellor and client can do this with sufficient space to learn and grow. Psychotherapy from this perspective is understood as a matter of facilitating personal growth rather than ‘healing illness’; it recognises the mutuality of the therapeutic relationship rather than taking an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ approach to therapeutic work with clients.

In order to engage in a heuristic process to see what learning about my ‘self’ may arise and what growth may occur, some of the above aspects of personhood have been emphasised and others excluded or ignored. As Stevens (1996) notes, it is difficult for some perspectives to accommodate certain aspects that make up a person due to the very assumptions on which the perspectives are based. Stevens (1996) notes contrasting perspectives on what it means to be a person in a social world including the biological perspective, cognitive experimentalist perspective, experiential perspective, psychodynamic perspective and social constructionist perspective. For example, the experimental perspective, which is based on the belief that only that which is measurable should form the subject matter of scientific psychology in its search for causes, assumes that behaviour is determined and therefore refutes or ignores the idea of people as autonomous agents. This completely contrasts with the psychoanalytic approach where unconscious meanings (which are not directly observable) are the focus of interest; this perspective views unconscious meanings as controlling the self and as too deeply buried to be lifted into awareness without the help of a psychoanalyst and so also conflicts with the humanistic perspective that people have some capacity for agency and choice. We are left with questions such as: Should our actions and experiences be considered to be entirely determined or are they in certain respects ‘open’? Are they merely the outcome of various determinants acting upon us, or is there a possibility for autonomy (creating new and potentially unpredictable actions)? (Stevens, 1996). My response is that these differences that separate perspectives are not black and white. Being a person is underpinned existentially by a sense of profound mystery. Therefore, we may have a sense of ourselves as being agents with some capability to self-determine what we do, but it is also true that the person we are ultimately derives

from factors outside of our control such as who our parents are, the body we inhabit or the society in which we grow up (Stevens, 1996).

The particular criteria I selected from the five aspects of what it means to be a person that contributed to the effect and influence of specific theories and how I chose to apply them are a matter of construction and therefore, are open to question. Depending on the perspective the reader constructs on the concept of 'self', he or she may pinpoint different weaknesses of this study. For instance, the humanistic perspective has been criticised by social constructionists for focusing on the individual and neglecting how the way in which a person lives helps to construct what they are. Therefore, a conflict seems to arise between experiential and social constructionist perspectives regarding assumptions of self-agency where a social constructionist perspective puts more emphasis on the aspect of the influence of social medium. Experiential perspectives are thus viewed as lacking acknowledgement of the limitations society places on one's agency, or ability to change their situation. This leads to critical reflections on the possible limitations of this methodology.

### **Limitations of heuristic self-search inquiry**

Use of self as my only participant may be seen as an epistemological limitation of this study that may be viewed as having neglected the role of 'others'. An experiential perspective does not seek to deny the influence of social factors. I wrote from the understanding that just as the body provides the medium for our existence as persons, so too does the social. The person we are and can hope to become is derived from the particular cultural and historical contexts we find ourselves in.

This significance of social medium is present in my own story involving my relationship with my mother and my growing up in a Western, individualistic society that influenced my familial values. The importance of the role of 'others' is present in discussion of Bion's 'K-link', in the concept of reverie and the importance of the self of the counsellor learning to tolerate uncertainty to facilitate the clients' learning. However, relational learning through dialogue with others about my own development or how others facilitated my own learning is not demonstrated. If it is understood

that learning occurs through experiences of being in the social world, a self is never just a self but a self in relationship, and relationships facilitate learning, then heuristic self-search inquiry does not explicitly leave room for relational learning or the voices of ‘others’ as integral in the phases of the heuristic process which solely focus on a personal, internal search.

Deciding not to broaden the scope of a heuristic self-search inquiry to include the influence of society (which has been inherently present in every aspect of this study) has allowed for a more intense focus on indwelling and accessing feelings, which was necessary for this particular self-study. Pace (2012) writes that including data from people other than the researcher is not necessary: “The necessity, value, and feasibility of such data will vary according to the specifics of a given project and the goals of its creator(s)” (p. 6). I connected to heuristic self-search inquiry that focuses on the experiencing person over the influence of society. Just as Sela-Smith argues against the use of co-researchers in heuristic inquiry because this may only act as a distraction from the ‘*I-who-feels*’, I acknowledge my choice of emphasis on what it means to be a person as necessary for confronting my ‘*I-who-feels*’, whereas more of a focus on the influence of society may have aided in my ambivalence and presented a different stance on agency in my own development as a practitioner. A social constructionist perspective with more emphasis on social medium on what it means to be a person would have produced a study with a different purpose and therefore adopted a different methodology.

My perspective is simply one perspective among many that does not necessarily contradict others, but makes particular aspects of what it means to be a person more predominant than other aspects (that may be regarded more highly by other perspectives) and therefore leads to the most appropriate research method that reinforces the perspective taken in order to fulfil the purpose of this study. I could not, for the purpose of this study, account for every aspect of what it means to be a person in a social world. It is worth noting that I regard the different perspectives as complementary and each provides insights and strengths that together create a fuller, richer understanding of psychological life that represents the

complexity of people in social worlds. Any potential weaknesses may simply suggest an opportunity for future research with a differing purpose taken up from a different perspective and thus investigated through an alternative research method.

### **Implications and suggestions for future research**

I have demonstrated a learning process through reflecting on experiences of uncertainty as heuristic research. By sharing my experiences, I hope to normalise not only experiences of uncertainty but also anxiety and vulnerability in the face of uncertainty that triggers existential concerns and encourage other practitioners to share their own experiences. I aim to stimulate practitioners' awareness of their relationship to uncertainty and how this might be carried into counselling practice and research. This study demonstrates the importance of learning to evaluate one's own therapeutic work, especially given the trend towards the professionalisation of therapeutic practice. The external evaluation of an accreditation board can only assess cognitive knowledge of theory and techniques and cannot evaluate how a counselling practitioner uses this knowledge with clients. Therefore, the importance of therapeutic 'use of self' is largely unrecognised. Furthermore, this study draws awareness to the limitations of counselling training on counsellor emotional development and therefore the ethical responsibility of counsellors to reflect on their own experiences during training for necessary personal learning to occur.

I hope this study reminds other trainee therapists that "all therapists bring imperfect selves to the practice of therapy" (Wosket, 1999, p. 118). Wosket (1999) reveals that, "when we are fallible we are at our most human and when we are our most human we are in touch with our greatest potential for helping clients" (p. 109). I wish for my study to incite a call to practitioners to explore their own 'use of self'. Readers can take a part of my story with them on their journey as they embark or continue on their own self-search. This is my suggestion for future research into how a counsellor learns to tolerate uncertainty as part of professional development of his or her unique therapeutic 'use of self'. If more practitioner-researchers embark on a heuristic self-search inquiry, which is firstly necessary for

practitioners to overcome ambivalence and address personal issues with uncertainty, a future research possibility could perhaps call for group participation in a research project that looks at tolerating uncertainty as a group that is open to what may arise. This would address the aforementioned lack of room for representing the voices of ‘others’ and relational learning in what could become an adaptation of heuristic self-search inquiry.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this segment of my learning journey, I have discussed personal learning and growth that has emerged out of my heuristic self-search inquiry. I revealed where I am in the present and how my feelings toward uncertainty in my life and counselling practice have changed in comparison to where I began. I discussed how my study contributes to counselling and psychotherapy literature, the strengths, challenges, and limitations of heuristic self-search inquiry and in regards to future research, I invited other practitioners, not to follow in my footsteps, but to create their own path.

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